Marcel Ray Duriez

Nevaeh

Book: 44

Walking After You

Part: 1

I hesitate, filling my palm with sand, unwilling to do it. Unlike her, I know the price, the dire significances the slightest skin-on-skin contact can bring. Which is why I have been avoiding her touch altogether, and scenes last Saturday.

Which is why I have been avoiding her touch altogether.

But when I peer at her yet again, her palm out, waiting for mine ever so softly, I take a deep breath and lift my hand too- gasping when he

draws so close the space that divides- us like a hair-thin.

‘Um- do you feel the sensation that?’ She smiles.

‘That tingle with the heat?’

‘That’s our energy linking- of bodies, minds, and souls.’

She moves her hand back and forth on my softly, employing the push and pull of the energy force sparking from me to her with a field bolt between us.

‘But if we are all linked as you say, then why doesn’t it all feel the same?’

Not like this was not, I have memories that they do not have, and well never- ever have.

I for one murmur, drawn by the undeniable charming stream that links us, causing the most wonderful warmth of course through my frame.

‘We are all linked, all of us made of the same vibrating source. Nonetheless, while some energy leaves you cold and some leaves you feeling like you are dying on the inside, the one that you are intended for? It feels just like this.’ I close my eyes and turn, allowing the tears to stream down my cheeks, no longer able to keep them in.

Knowing I am barred from the feel of her skin, the touch of her lips, the solid warm comfort of her body on mine.

This electrical energy field that trembles between you and me- like- is the closest I will get to feeling precious, thanks to the horrible decision I made I have never- ever felt real love.

‘Knowledge is just now catching up with what metaphysicians and the great spiritual instructors have known for eras.’

‘Everything is vigor energy of stamina. Everything is one with that- understand.’

‘Somehow some way we are all the same with the link.’

I can hear the smile in her voice as she draws closer, eager to entwine her fingers with mine.

But then again, I move away too swiftly…

-Then-

Emmah said- ‘Pennsylvania was the first state to legalized witchcraft, that is why we're all mostly from those parts.’

Catching her eye just long enough to see, the look of hurt that across-ed her face- the same look she has been giving me since, I made her drink the antidote that returned her to life, and to feel all things like love- and all the feeling a teen girl should have as if she was alive.

Wondering why-why?

Why- I am acting so silent, noiseless, inaudible, still, and quiet.

So, aloof, so remote- rejecting to touch her when just a few weeks earlier, I could not get enough.

Erroneously assuming it is because of her hurtful behavior- she is flirting with Emmah, her cruelty toward me- when the truth is, it has nothing to do with that. She was under Naddalin's spell, the entire school was. It was not her fault.

What she does not know is that while the antidote returned her to life, the moment I added my blood to the mix it also ensured we could never-ever be together.

Never! Ever! For all of eternity!!!

‘Ever?’ She undertones, in her voice, that is too deep and sincere. But I cannot look at her. Cannot touch her; along with certainly cannot utter the words she deserves to hear- I messed up- I am so sorry- Jinger tricked me, and I was desperate and dumb enough to fall for her trick- Besides now there is no hope for us because, if you kiss me if we exchange our DNA- you will die- I cannot do it. I am the worst kind of coward. I am pathetic and weak. And there is just no way I can find it within me.

‘Ever, please, what is it?’ she asks, alarmed by my tears.

‘You’ve been like theirs for days. Is it me?

Is it something I have done?

Because you know I do not remember much of what happened, and the memories that are starting to surface, well, you must know by now that was not the real me.

I would never- ever- ever deliberately hurt you.

‘I’d never harm you in any way.’

I hug myself tightly, squeezing my shoulders, and bowing my heart.

Wishing I could make myself smaller, so small she could no longer see me. Knowing her words are true, that she is incapable of hurting me, only I could do something so hurtful, so rash, so ridiculously impulsive.

Only, I could be stupid enough to fall for Naddalin. So, eager to prove myself as Naddalin's one true love-wanting to be the only one who could save her-and now look at the mess that I have made.

Then she moves toward me, sliding her arm around me, grasping my waist, and pulling me nearby. Nonetheless, I cannot risk the

closeness, my tears are deadly now, and must be kept far from her skin.

I- Emmah then climbs to my feet and runs toward the water's edge, curling my toes at its edge and allowing the cold white froth to splash onto my shins, that is on the far end of the castle beach.

-And-

Wishing I could dive under its incalculability and be carried by the tide.

Anything to avoid saying the words-anything to avoid telling my one true love, my eternal partner, my soul

mate for the last four hundred years, that while she may have given me an eternity- I have brought us our end.

-Then-

I stay like that, silent and still and hushed. Waiting for the sun to sink until I finally turned to face her.

Taking in her dark shadowy outline- indistinguishable from the night, and speaking past the sting in my throat when I mumble…

‘Naddalin… baby- girl… there’s something- that, I need to tell you.’

Part: 2

I kneel beside her, hands on my knees, toes buried in black sand, wishing she would look at me, wishing she would say something.

Even if it is only to tell me what I already know- that I made a grave and stupid mistake-one that will never be erased.

I would gladly accept it, I deserve it. What I cannot stand is her absolute silence and daydreaming gaze.

Besides, I am about to say anything, something, to break the intolerable motionlessness tranquilities,’ when she looks at me,

with eyes so weary they're the perfect byword of her years.

'Naddalin.'

She sighs, shaking her head. 'I didn't identify her; I had no idea-' Her voice trails off along with her stare.

'There's no way you could've known,' I say, eager to erase any guilt she might feel.

'You were under her spell from the very first day. Believe me, she had it all planned, made sure any memories were completely erased.'

Her eyes search my face studying me closely before she stands

and turns away. Gazing out at the water's edge, hands balled into fists as she says, 'Did she hurt you?'

'Did she go after you or harm you in any way?'

I shake my head back and forth.

'She didn't have to; it was enough to hurt me through you.'

She turns, eyes growing darker as her features strengthen, inhaling deeply as she says, 'This is all my fault.'

I gawk, conjecturing how she could have faith in that after the case I just made.

-And-

Rising to my feet and standing beside her as I cry, ‘Don’t be ludicrous! Of course, it is not your fault!’

‘Did you listen to anything I said?’ I shake my head.

‘Naddalin poisoned your elixir and hypnotized you. You had nothing to do with it, you were just doing her bidding-it was beyond your control!’

Nonetheless, I have scarcely finished when she is already discharging it with a wave of her hand. ‘Ever, don’t you see? The is not about Naddalin, or you, the is karma.

‘The is vengeance for centuries of selfish living.’

She then shakes her head and giggles, though it is not the kind that asks you to join in.

It is the other kind-the kind that chills you to the bone.

‘After all those years of loving you and losing you, repeatedly, I was sure that was my punishment for the way I had been living, having no idea you’d died at Haven’s hand. But now I see the truth I have missed all along. Just when I was sure I had evaded karma by making you immortal and

keeping you forever by my side, karma gets the last laugh, allowing us an eternity together, but only to look, never to touch each other again.'

I reach for her, wanting to hold her, comfort her, convince her that it is not at all true. But I pulled away just as quickly.

Remembering how our inability to touch is the very thing that got us both here.

'That's not true,' I say, gaze fixed on her. 'Why would you be punished when I'm the one who made the mistake?

Don’t you see?’

I- Emmah shakes my head, irritated by her singular way of thinking.

‘Naddalin planned it all along. She love’s Haven- I bet you did not know that, huh? She was one of the orphans you saved, and she loved her for all of those tough times when she was like you, would’ve done anything for her.’

But Haven did not care about her- as she should, she only loved her- and her only, loved me-and then, well, after they killed her, Naddalin decided

to go after me-only she did it through you.

Wanting me to feel the pain of never being able to touch you again- just as she feels with Haven!

-And-

It all happened so fast, I just-’ I stop, knowing it’s useless, a total waste of words. She stopped listening just after I started, convinced she at fault for some of this- I knew- what I did not get was the hex causing all this.

Nonetheless, I refuse to even visit that place, and I will not let her either.

‘Naddalin, please!’

‘You can’t just give up.’

The is not karma-it is me! I made a mistake, horrible, dreadful mistakes also.

But that does not mean we cannot fix it!

‘See that was something I could never do is- FIX THING TO OTHER’S LIKING’S.’

There must be a way away.’ Clinging to the falsest of hopes, forcing enthusiasm, I do not feel- THAT ANY LONGER.

Naddalin stands before me, a dark silhouette in the night, the warmth of her sad tired gaze serving as our only embrace.

‘I never should’ve started,’ she says.

‘Never should’ve made the tonic-should’ve let things take their expected path.’

‘Seriously, Ever, just look at the result-it’s brought nothing but pain!’

She shakes her head, her gaze so sad, so apologetic, my heart caves.

‘There’s still time for you though.’

You have your whole life ahead of you-an eternity where you can be anything you want to be, do anything you want to do.

But for me- she shrugs. ‘I’m tainted. I think we can all see the result of my hundred years.’

‘Nope!’ My voice quivers as my lips tremble so seriously it spreads to my cheeks.

‘You don’t get to walk away; you don’t get to leave me once more! I spent the last month going through hell

to save you. Besides, now that you are well, I am not about to give up. We are meant for each other, you said it yourself! We are just suffering a brief setback, that is all. Nonetheless, if we can just put our heads together, I know we'll think of a way to…'

I stop, voice fading, seeing her already moved on, retreating to her bleak sorry world where- she is solely at fault for it all.

Besides, I know it is time to tell the rest of the story, the sorry, regretful parts I would prefer to leave out.

Maybe then she will see it without a dealt, then…

‘So-o, before you assume karma’s out to get you or whatever, you need to know something else, something I’m not accurately proud of, but still-’ ‘There’s more,’ I say, swish ahead though I’ve no idea how to phrase what comes next.

I without delay take a deep breath…

-And-

Also, I tell her about my trips to Earth and my homeland and the town around- to me was the world, that

magical dimension between the dimensions, where I learned how to go back to time and that given the choice between my family and her-I chose her- over them- yet that is getting hard for me to do.

Persuaded and influenced, I could one way or another restore the future I was sure had been stolen, and up till now all it amounted to be a lesson I already knew- that occasionally destiny lies just outside of our reach, and it is not graspable.

I swallow hard and stare at the black sand, reluctant to see Naddalin’s

reaction when she considers the eyes of the one who betrayed her.

But then again, as an alternative of getting mad or upset like I thought, her environs me with the most beautiful glowing white light-a light so comforting, so forgiving, so pure- it is like the portal to my home - only better it is a connection of body, mind, and soul.

So-o, I close my eyes and surround her with light too, and when I open them again, we are wrapped in the most beautiful warm hazy glow.

‘You had no choice,’ she says, in a gentle voice with a very soothing, gaze, doing everything she can to ease all my shame.

‘Unquestionably, you chose your family…’

It was the right thing to do….

I would have done the same given the choice… yet, do I HAVE THE RIGHT TO CHOOSE.

I nod, shining her light even brighter and tackling a telepathic embrace. Knowing it is not as comforting as the real thing but for now, it will do.

‘I know about your family, I know all, I saw it all-’ Her looks at me with eyes so dark and intense I force myself to go on.

‘You’re always so secretive about your past, where you came from, how you lived-and so one day, while I was in Hastings; I asked about you-and-well-your entire life story was revealed.’

I press my lips together and peer at her standing before me so silent and still.

Moaning as she gazes into my eyes and telepathically traces her

fingers along the curve of my cheek- creating an image so deliberate, so tangible, it almost seems real.

'I'm sorry,' say says nit-picking, thumb mentally smoothing my chin.

'I'm sorry,' 'I was so shut down and disinclined to share that, I reduced you to that. But then again, even though it happened a long time ago, it's still something I for one would rather not to confer.'

I nod, having no intention of pushing it. Her seeing her parents' murder followed by years of abuse at

the hands of the church is not a subject I intend to pursue.

‘But there’s more,’ I say, hoping I can restore a little hope by sharing something else, and that I learned.

‘When I was watching your life unfold, in the end, Naddalin had killed you.

Then even though that seemed meant to be, I still managed to save you.’

I look at her, sensing she is far from swaying and rushing ahead before I lose her completely.

‘I mean, yes, maybe our fate is sometimes fixed and unvarying, but there are other times when it’s shaped morally by the actions we take.

So, when I could not save my family by going back in time, it is only because that was destiny that could not be changed.

‘It’s beautiful… that you can change destiny.’

Or as Riley my pain in the butt little sisters, yet my best little friend too was all meant to be, then just a second before the second accident, that

took them again… yet she never did say she loves me either.

‘Love not to be- for me- it was my destiny!’ Said, Emmah.

‘You can’t change the past; it just is more of the past remand it kills the future.’

‘Nonetheless, when I found myself right back here in Hastings, and I was able to save you, well, it evidences that the future isn’t always concrete, not everything is ruled solely by fate.’

‘Maybe so-o.’ She sighs, gazes fixed on me, and my fate.’

‘But then again you cannot escape karma, ever …?... It is what it is …?... It doesn’t judge, it’s neither good nor immoral like most people ponder.’

Naddalin- I heard them call me a baby rapper to my face, and there was nothing I could but stand there, hearing these lies day in and day out; like all the other lies, as well- that was just that nothing but lies.

Emmah- ‘It’s the result of all actions, positive and negative-a constant balancing of events-cause and effect-tit for tat-reaping and sowing- what goes around comes around.’

‘Look at Karly’s destiny- and what she did over not having a or education and did not want to work for $2.00 an hour, a hamburger joint. So, all she had to do is make on a shit video of her, this is just one out of a hundred- I recall this one for $20.00 - ‘teen masturbates & fucks her dildo’- saying the headline- (‘22-mins of me enjoying myself deliciously. Watch me cum over and over with my toys. Adore my long legs, my small tits, and my bush while- I let myself go crazy thinking about you.’)

It had 3,555 views- and she made $71,100 just with that… was it

wrong some would say, yet what other choice did she have? Yet that makes her the bad girl- she is a girl after all- that showed that she was one- and had needs- and need the money more than modesty in a world that could give a flying shit about her- in any way.’ With one video, she has made $6,000,000 in her short life, be the end days of it and money still has not made a destiny for her either. Said, Naddalin.

She shrugs her shoulders…

‘However, you phrase it, it’s the same in the end- is it not?’

Then… we are the bad ones out over- it is our destiny.

Emmah- ‘And as much as you would like to think otherwise, that is exactly what is happening here with you sometimes you just must ask if… God’s at are just screwing us.’

‘I have been there too…’

‘All actions cause a reaction, I pounder even now- still having faith, even if some days I faulted like a human that was deemed- less then human….’ Said Emmah.

‘By them…’ she said.

‘By them…’ Naddalin said.

Part: 3

She shakes her head…

‘And the is where to have my actions have brought me- either.’

‘Then again you need to ride 20 dicks before you find the right one if ever you do.’

‘Ture- true… that you do… both- girls felt unanimous- saying we have been hurt, so badly, that way we turned to girls, for love, girls well love always when boys are a macho asshole, that is just impressing their jackoff boyfriends!’

‘All the time, I told myself I turned you out of love-but now I see it was really out of self-interest- because I couldn’t be without you.’

'You like this?' She asks softly, her teeth nibbling my outer ear, and she starts to flex her thumb slowly, in, out, in, out... of me, her fingers still circling the fleshy lips that move about with her thumb, that connecting line linking as she pulled it away of wetness.

I close my eyes, trying to keep my breathing under control, trying to absorb the disordered, muddled sensations that her fingers are

releasing on me, fire coursing through my body. I moan again.

‘You're so wet, so quickly.’

‘Open your mouth,’ she commands and thrusts his thumb in my mouth. My eyes fly open, blinking wildly.

‘Let me make cum for you!’

‘M-mm- you are my Oreo cookie, that I just have to spate and like out the creamy center.’

Her thumb presses on my tongue, and my mouth closes around her, sucking wildly on the beach. I am panting once more as I tug at her with

my mouth, and it trails down and under my chin, I can taste the smooth, rich leather or her.

‘See how you taste,’ she breathes against my ear. ‘Suck down on me, the baby she said.’

I taste the saltiness on his thumb and the faint metallic tang of blood.

‘That’s why is happening now.’

‘So, that’s it?’ I shake my head, hardly believing he is determined to give up so easily. ‘That’s how it ends?

You are just so dang sure you have been chased down by karma you do not even try to fight back?

‘What’s the use…?’ She said to Naddalin.

You came all the way just so we could be together, at last… and now that we’re facing difficulty, you’re not even going to try to walk with me down this path- hand in hand?’

‘Ever- and ever- never, letting go of ever- and forever- never.’

Her gaze is warm, loving, all-encircling like her hair and tightly squeezing arms, as they are falling

around her as they fall together to the gold wheatgrass within the black sand, but it does nothing to stop the defeat in her voice, of worn-out yet want the love and touch of each other hands and bodies.

‘I’m sorry, but there are some things I just know.’

‘Yeah, well…’ I shake my head and gaze down at the ground they are laying on top of the tall grasses swaying in the breeze, burying my toes deep in the sand.

‘Just because you’ve got a few centuries on me doesn’t mean you get

the last word. Because if we are truly in the together, if our lives, like our fate, are truly entwined, then you will realize she is not just happening to you, I am part of it too. And you do not get to walk away from it, you do not get to walk away from me! We must work together! There has to be a way,' I stop, body shaking, throat closed so tight, I can no longer speak. All I can do is stand there before her, silently urging her to join me in a fight I am not sure we can win.

'I've no plans to leave you,' she says, gaze filled with the longing of four hundred years. 'I can't leave you, ever.

Believe me, I have tried. But in the end, I always find my way back to your side. You're all I've ever wanted-all I've ever loved-but Ever-'

'No buts...' I shake my head, wishing I could hold her, touch her, press my body tightly against her. 'There's got to be away, cure. And together we will find it. I just know that we will. We have come too far to let Naddalin keep us apart. But I cannot do it alone. Not without your help. So please promise me-promise you'll try.'

She looks at me, her gaze luring me in. Closing her eyes as she fills the beach with so many tulips, the

entire cove is bursting with waxy red petals atop green curving stems-the ultimate symbol of our undying love covering every square inch of sand.

Then she slips her arm through mine and leads me back to her car. Our skin separated only by her supple black leather jacket and my organic cotton tee. Enough to spare the consequences of any accidental DNA exchange, but unable to temper the tingle and heart that pulsates between us.

‘Never should’ve made the elixir-should’ve let things take their natural course.

Seriously, Ever, just look at the result-it's brought nothing but pain!'

Without delay now at that time she shakes her head, her gaze so sad, so remorseful, my heart caves.

'There's still time for you though.

You have your whole life ahead of you- an endlessness where you can be whatsoever you want to be, do anything you want to do. But for me- she shrugs at me like a young girl that she is. 'I'm contaminated. I think we can all see the consequence of my hundred years.'

‘No!’ My voice quivers as my lips shake so-o badly it spreads to my cheeks.

‘You don’t get to walk away; you don’t get to leave me again!

I spent last month going through hell to save you, and now that you are well, I am not about to give up.

We are meant for each other, you said it yourself to me many times!

We are just feeling a temporary setback, that is all.

Nonetheless, if we can just put our heads together, I know we’ll think of a way to... you and me.’

I stop, voice fading, seeing she previously moved on, withdrawing to her bleak sorry world where she solely to blame.

Then- I know it is time to tell the rest of the story, the sorry, regretful parts I would prefer to leave out. Maybe then she will see it differently, then-, and there… ‘There’s more,’ I say, whistle ahead though I’ve no idea how to phrase what comes following.

‘So, before you assume karma is out to get you or whatever, you need to know something else, something I am not precisely proud of, but still- I

take a deep breath… and hold it- letting it out slowly.

Besides, tell her about my trips back home there is that magical dimension, left out of my life for a while, and the space between the dimensions where I learned how to go back in time and that given the choice between my family and her- I chose her, I choose to be here.

Influenced I could somehow restore the future, I was sure I had been pilfered, and yet it all amounted to be a lesson I already knew: Occasionally destiny lies just outside of our range for girls like you and me.

I swallow hard and stare at the sand, reluctant to see Naddalin's reaction when she looks into the eyes of the one who betrayed her.

So-o I close my eyes and surround her with light too, and when I open them again, we are wrapped in the most gorgeous warm hazy glow.

But then again, as an alternative of getting mad or upset… like I thought, she environs me with the loveliest glowing white light-a light so comforting, so magnanimous, so pure- it is like the portal to another world- only better- and we go there together.

‘You had no choice,’ she says, voice gentle, gaze soothing, doing everything she can to ease all my shame. ‘Of course, you chose your family. It was the right thing to do. I would’ve done the same given the choice.’

I nod, shining her light even brighter and tackling a telepathic embrace.

Knowing it is not as comforting as the real thing but for now, it will do.

‘I know about your family, I know everything, I saw it all-’ she looks at me with eyes so dark and intense, I

force myself to endure. ‘You’re always so secretive about your past, where you came from, how you lived-and so one day, while I back on Earth I found out your story and where you’re really from… I did… I asked about you-and-well-your entire life story was revealed to me just by reading between the lines.’

I press my lips together and peer at her standing before me so silent and still. Exhaling as she gazes into my eyes and telepathically traces her fingers along the curve of my cheek-creating an image so deliberate, so palpable, it almost seems real.

Part: 4

‘I’m sorry,’ she says, thumb mentally smoothing my chin. ‘I’m remorseful I was so shut down and unwilling to share, that I condensed you to that. However even though it happened a long time ago, it’s still something I prefer not to discuss any further.’

I nod at her, having no intention of pushing it anymore. She is seeing her parents’ homicide followed by years of abuse at the hands of the church is not a topic- I intend to pursue, over the pain that she had on the inside cover it all.

‘Nonetheless, there is more,’ I say, hoping I can reestablish a little hope by sharing something else that I learned.

‘When I was watching your life unfold, in the end, Naddalin had killed you. Nevertheless, even though that seemed fated to happen, I still managed to save you.’

I gaze at her, sensing she is far from convinced and rushing ahead before, I lose her entirely.

‘I mean, yes, maybe our providence of destiny is sometimes fixed and unalterable, but there are

other times when it’s shaped purely by the actions we take.

So-o when I could not save my family by going back in time, it is only because it was a destiny that could not be changed.

Or as Riley said seconds before the second accident that took them again, ‘You cannot change the past, it just is.

Naddalin- ‘I knew a girl that did that over and over named Karly- and your right you can’t but you can go back to see what you have lost, by

seeing what you gave up on be- maybe doing thing differently.’

‘Nonetheless, when I found myself right back here, and I was able to save you, well, it proves that the future isn’t always tangible, not everything is ruled solely by fate.’

‘Maybe so.’ Her sighs gaze fixed on mine. ‘But you cannot escape karma, Ever- and Never.

It is what it is… No?

Yes?

Maybe?

It does not judge, it is neither good nor bad like most individuals are

‘So, that’s it?’ I shake my head, hardly believing she is determined to give up so easily. ‘That’s how it ends? You are just so dang sure you have been chased down by karma you do not even try to fight back? You came all the way just so we could be together and now that we’re facing an obstacle, you’re not even going to try to scale the brick wall in our path?’

‘Ever-’ her gaze is warm, loving, all-encompassing, but it does nothing to cancel the defeat in her

voice. ‘I’m sorry, but there are some things I just know.’

‘Yeah, well…’ I shake my head and gaze down at the ground, burying my toes deep in the sand. ‘Just because you’ve got a few centuries on me doesn’t mean you get the last word. Because if we are truly in the together, if our lives, like our fate, are truly entwined, then you will realize she is not just happening to you, I am part of it too.

-And-

Like- you do not get to walk away from it you do not get to walk

away from me! We must work together! There has to be away-' I stop, body shaking, throat closed so tight I can no longer speak. All I can do is stand there before her, silently urging her to join me in a fight I am not sure we can win.

'I've no plans to leave you,' she says, gaze filled with the longing of four hundred years. 'I can't leave you, ever. Believe me, I have tried. But in the end, I always find my way back to your side. You're all I've ever wanted-all I've ever loved-but Ever-'

'No buts...' I shake my head, wishing I could hold her, touch her, press my body tightly against her.

‘There’s got to be away, cure. And together we will find it. I just know that we will. We have come too far to let Naddalin keep us apart. But I cannot do it alone. Not without your help. So please promise me-promise you’ll try.’

She looks at me, her gaze luring me in…

Closing her eyes as she fills the beach with so many lilies the entire cove is bursting with waxy pink petals atop green curving stems-the ultimate symbol of our undying love covering every square inch of sand.

Then she slips her arm through mine and leads me back to her car.

Our skin separated only by her supple uniform and my organic cotton tee that was underneath my whit loses fitting blouse, that is fluttering in the wind open, like my hair.

Enough to spare the penalties for any accidental DNA exchange, but unable to temper the tingle and heart that pulsates between us even then even though.

She shrugs… even so-o.

It’s the result of all actions, a positive and negative-a constant

balancing of events-cause and effect-tit for tat-reaping and sowing-what goes around comes around.'

'Though you phrase it, it's the same in the end. Besides, as much as you would like to think otherwise, that is exactly what is happening here. Altogether actions cause a response.

'All the time I told myself I turned you out of love-but now I see it was really out of selfishness-for the reason that I couldn't be without you. That's why it is happening now.'

‘And the is where my actions have brought me.’ She- being Emmah shakes her head.

(Some time has passed)

‘Guess what?’

She gazes at me as she climbs to her knees looking down with her hair falling all around me, in the sand.

Her big eyes are wider than usual, cute baby face curving into a grin. ‘No, you know what? Do not guess…

I will just tell you because you are never going to believe it! You’re never going to deduction!’

I smile, hearing her thoughts a few moments before she can speak to them, refraining from saying the wrong thing.

But I did say your good friend Naddalin, who actually- knows all and everything about me!

You and I dating- ‘I’ve known about the possibility for a few weeks, but it just became official last night, and I still can’t believe it!

Eight weeks in France you and I could spend, doing nothing but acting, eating, and stalking smoldering hot men... to yet know that she and I are

even more perfect this some man, over the fact that we get each other, yet it's fun to play with boys.'

I glance at her as I back out of her drive. 'And Holt's good with all that?'

She looks at me. 'Faster, you know the drill. What happens in here stays in here.'

Walking down the street hand in hand… as girlfriends.

My thoughts drifting to Haven and Naddalin, wondering how many more immortal rogues are still out there, just waiting to show up in my

mind over and over to terrorize me, no matter where I go.

Except when it does not, I feel the most fear- over knowing what next, by them.

‘Anyway, I am leaving soon, just after school gets out.’

I did not want to say yet this is our last time to be together… I am moving on to a new life.

And I have so much to prepare between now and then!

‘Seriously perfect.’ I smile, and the best of it all. ‘Congrats, on making it see what you lost.’

‘That’s so cool. And well deserved I might add. I only wish I could go with you.’

And the moment I say it, I realize it is true, I am happy for her- yet I feel like I am losing yet, another person in my life.

It would be so nice to escape all my problems and fly away from all the and that what we did, wings soring, to angels in flight at midnight- in starlight.

Besides, I miss hanging out with her, already.

Part: 5

The last few weeks when she and Haven (along with the rest of the school) were under Naddalin's spell were some of the loneliest days of my life.

Not having Naddalin beside me was more than I could bear, but not having the care of my two best friends nearly sent me over the edge.

Nevertheless, she and Haven do not evoke any of that, none of them do. Only Naddalin can access small bits and pieces, and what she recalls leaves her feeling guilty.

We stay in youth hostels, backpack around-how cool is this? Just the three of us, you know, you and Naddalin, Haven and I, and me and whoever…'

'You and whoever… we meet along the way too?' I glanced at her. 'What's that about?'

'I'm a realist.' She shrugs.

'Oh, come on.' I roll my eyes. 'Since when?'

'Since last night when I found out I'm going back home and starting over.'

Part: 6

She giggles, running a hand through her brown hair.

‘Listen, you all great and all, don’t get me wrong.’

But I am not fooling myself.

I am not pretending it is anything more than it is, am I? It is like we have an end date; you know- and it is just my time- to try over- I will see you again I promise? You guys are different, you’re lifers.’

Let us see a show with a full three acts with a definite beginning, middle, and end. It is not like with you and Naddalin.

‘Lifers?’ I peer at her, shaking my head as I stop at a traffic light. ‘Sounds more like a prison term than a happily ever after- yet that is how girls like lives go.’

‘You know what I mean don’t you.’

She inspects her shape, turning her hot-pink nails the way and that. ‘It’s just that you guys are so in tune with each other, so connected.

And I mean that literally by the way since you’re always going at it.’

Not anymore, I swallow hard, waking fast the second the light turns

from not showing the hand, crossing the intersection with a loud screech of wheels stopping for us to go to the walkway, and leaving a thick trail of rubber behind them.

But even after I sat still for a moment to think she was nowhere to be found. Besides, I am about to climb a wall in a panic, wondering where she could be, when she appears right beside me- and I blink- blink and blink once more, her hand in mine the whole time- I think I have blacked out a moment there. Refusing to slow until we ran into a parking lot, and I scan for Naddalin, who always seems to stare

down danger more than us, in a second- she was next to me.

She asks, glancing at me and her, and slings her backpack over her shoulder.

Naddalin nods.

‘A hundred and ten euros.’ Naddalin laughs. ‘Don’t forget, it was fully customized and loaded with options.’ there looking at scooters.’

‘We could rent one… no?’ Said Emmah.

‘Yet that lest one girl out- no.’ Said Naddalin.

She stares at her eyes practically bugging out of her head, unable to understand how anyone could do such a thing-why anyone would do such a thing, as buy one.

Part: 7

(The next day)

‘Um, okay, so let me get the traditional one we could see a lot more- she said, ‘so-o you just woke up and decided-hurry, what the hell?’ ‘…And we have to look at the locals- and do as they do.’

‘We get you one- and in the same breath she said, Emmah and I well ride tandem.’

I think I’ll just dump my ridiculously expensive luxury scooter by the side of the road-WHERE JUST ANYONE CAN TAKE IT?’

Naddalin shrugs, saying ‘Pretty much’- with an attitude. ‘You have a lock…’ she said ‘…and the people around here are not like back home.’

‘Because in case you have not noticed,’ Emmah says, practically hyperventilating now.

‘Some of us are a little scooter deprived’ said, Haven, I just said today I would get you one- relax- even if just renting one.’

‘Some of us were born to parents so cruel and unusual they’re forced to rely on the kindness of friends for the rest of their lives, thank you truly, and yes I would take the gift- thanks!’

‘Sorry,’ Naddalin shrugs, about that- yet you did get all that you wanted and more. ‘Guess- I hadn’t thought about that. Though if it makes you feel any better, it was all for a particularly worthy cause.’ (She gives double

thumbs up! And a wide smile with her head turned to one side.)

And when she looks at me, eyes meeting mine in that way that she has, along with the usual wave of warmth, I get the horrible feeling that ditching the scooters is just the start of her plans, to get to know me better, walking is taking she thought…

‘How’d you get to school?’ I ask, just as we reach the front gate where Haven is waiting, took the train as you, and walked and walked…

‘She rode the train.’ Haven glances between us, she recently dyed,

her bangs falling into her face, to make herself look Earthlier. ‘I kid you not. I would not have believed it either, but I saw it with my own eyes, she was classed as a girl forever.

Watched her climb right off that big steamer train, with all the other freshmen, dorks, retards, and rejects who that were all like us, unlike Naddalin, have no other choice but to ride.’ She shakes her head, saying do not say it like that- think it does not say it even if true.

‘And I was so shocked by the sight of it, I blinked a bunch of times just to make sure it was her. And then,

when I still was not convinced, I snapped a pic on my cell and sent it to Josh who confirmed it.' She holds it up for us to see.

I glance at Naddalin, wondering what she could- be up to, and that is when I notice she is ditched her usual cashmere sweater in place of a plain cotton tee, and how her designer jeans have been replaced with no-name plain pockets, her early look as she calls it.

Even the brown boots she is famous for have been swapped for girlie rubber flip-flops.

And even though she does not need any of that dash and flash to look as incredibly beautiful as the first day we met the new low-key look just is not her- I thought.

Or at least not her- that I am so-o used to.

I mean, while Naddalin is incontrovertibly smart, kind, loving, and generous- she is also more than a tad colorful and otiose at times.

Always preoccupied with her clothes, her image in general- along with smarts.

Also, do not even try and pin her down on her exact date of birth, since for someone who chose to be immortal, she has a definite multi-layered hidden point of view about her age- to use she is always the same age as the young teen girl.

Nonetheless, even though I normally could not care less about the clothes she wears or her ride to school look either, when I look at her again, I get the horrible chink in my belly-an an unrelenting push, demanding my notice.

A definite warning that she is merely the beginning. That the sudden

transformation goes deeper than some cost-cutting, altruistic, environmentally conscious agenda. No, she has something to do with last night. Something about being haunted by her karma. Like she is convinced herself that giving up her most prized possessions will somehow balance it all out.

‘Shall we?’ She smiles, grasping my hand the second the bell rings, leading me away from Emmah and Haven who will spend the next three phases of their time texting back and forth, trying to decide what is up with Naddalin.

I look at her, her gloved covering hand in mine as we heard down the hall, whispering, ‘What’s going on? What happened to your scooter?’

Three girls' hands and hands going down the sidewalk…

‘I already told you.’ she shrugs her hold body. ‘I don’t need it. It’s an unnecessary sympathy, I no longer care to indulge.’

She giggles, looking at me smiling. But when I do not join in, she sinkers more and shakes her head and says, ‘Don’t look so serious.

It is not a big deal. When I realized it is not something I need, I drove it out to a depressed area and left it by the side of the road where someone can find it.'

I press my lips together and stare straight ahead, wishing I could climb inside her mind, and see the thoughts she keeps all to herself, find the underlying cause of what the is about.

Because- despite the way she looks at me, despite the dismissive shrug that she gives, nothing she is said makes the least bit of sense.

‘Well, that’s fine and all, I mean, if that’s what you need to do, then great, have fun.’ I shrug, fully convinced that it is not at all great, though knowing better than to say it aloud.

‘But just how are you planning to get around now that you’ve ditched your ride? I mean, in case you haven’t noticed, this is not back home where you can run around freely, you can’t get anywhere without having a motorbike.’

She looks at me, amused by my surge of lighter, which is not exactly

the reaction I had prearranged. ‘What’s wrong with the bus? It’s free.’

I gape, shaking my head, hardly believing my ears. And since when do you worry about cost, Missy.

‘As some shallow, money-oriented, self-absorbed, buyer-driven slob?’

‘No!’ I cry, shaking my head and squeezing her hand.

Hoping to convince her even though, I did mean it- not being mean yet truthful. Only not in a bad way like she thinks or you even.

At one time, she had my old boyfriend appreciate the finer things in life kind of thing, and less in my girlfriend's now she is the version of what I am looking for in that kind of way, even if a girl.

'I just-' I squint, wishing I could be even half as eloquent as her, but still forging ahead when I say, 'I guess I just don't get it.' I shrug. 'And what's up with the glove?' I raise her leather-clad hand to where we can see.

'Isn't it obvious?' She shakes her head and pulls me toward the door.

But I just stay put, refusing to budge. Nothing is obvious… Nothing makes sense anymore.

She pauses, hand on the knob, more than a little hurt when she says, ‘I thought it was a satisfactory solution for now. But perhaps you’d prefer I not touch you at all?’

Not at all!

That is not what I intended!

Part: 8

(Back at school)

Switching to telepathy the moment some classmates approach,

reminding her how hard it has been avoiding any skin-on-skin contact for the last three days.

Fantasizing, I had a cold when we both know we do not get sick, and other ridiculous avoidance techniques that left me feeling deeply ashamed. It has been torture, pure, and simple. To have a girlfriend so gorgeous, so sexy, so amazingly awesome-and to not be able to touch her-is the worst kind of agony.

‘I mean, I know we can’t risk any accidental palm sweat exchange or anything like that, but still, don’t you

think it looks kind of odd?' I whisper, the second we are alone again.

'I don't care about that.' Her gaze open, sincere, and fixed right on mine. 'I don't care what other people think. I only care about you.'

She squeezes my fingers and opens the door with her mind, leading me right past Emmah and the other girls as we head for our desks.

And even though I have not seen her since Friday when she woke from Naddalin's spell, I am sure her hatred for me has not dampened a bit.

But while I am fully braced for her usual ploy of dropping her bag in my path to trip me-today she is too distracted by Naddalin’s fresh look to play that tired old game.

Her unhurried gaze traveling the length of her, from her head to her toes, before starting all over again.

But just because she ignores me does not mean I can relax or trust that it is over. Because the truth is, it is never over with Emmah. She has made that abundantly clear. If anything, she is more charged up and vicious than ever making the little reprieve nothing more than the calm before the storm.

‘Ignore her,’ Naddalin whispers, scooting her desk so close the edges practically overlap.

Besides even though I nod as though I am, the truth is- I cannot. As much as I would love to pretend, she is invisible- I cannot do it.

She is in front of me now and I am completely obsessed. Peering into her thoughts, wanting to see what if anything happened between them.

Since even though I know Naddalin’s responsible for all the flirting, and kissing, and cuddling, I had no choice but to watch.

Even though I know that Naddalin was completely deprived of free will that does not change the fact that it happened- that Naddalin's lips pressed against her while her hands roamed her skin.

And even though I am sure it did not go any further than that, I would still feel a heck of a lot better, if I could just get some evidence to back up my theory.

And despite how crazy, hurtful, and completely masochistic it is- I will not stop until her memory gives, and every horrible, painful, excruciating detail is finally revealed.

I’m just about to delve deeper, travel to the very core of her brain, when Naddalin squeezes my hand and says, ‘Ever, please. Stop torturing yourself.

I’ve already told you, there’s nothing to see.’ I swallow hard, gaze fixed on the back of her head, watching her gossip with Jewell and Mireille, barely listening as she adds, ‘It didn’t happen. It’s not what you think.’

‘I thought you couldn’t remember?’ I turn, overcome with shame the instant I see the pain in her eyes as she looks at me and shakes her head.

‘Just trust me.’ She sighs loudly. ‘Or at least try to. Please?’

I inhale deeply, gazing at her, wishing I could, knowing I should.

‘Utterly, constantly. First, you could not get over the past hundred years of my dating, and now you’re obsessed with last week?’

She knits her brow and leans closer, voice urgent, coaxing, as she adds, ‘I know that your feelings are unbelievably hurt. I do. But what has been done is done. I cannot go back; I cannot change it. Naddalin’s done the on purpose-you can’t let her win.’

I swallow hard, knowing she is right.

I am acting ridiculously, irrational, allowing myself to veer way off track.

Besides, Naddalin thinks, switching to telepathy now that our teacher, Mr. Robins, has arrived. You know it is meaningless. The only one I have ever loved is you. Isn’t that enough?

She brings her gloved thumb to my temple, gazing into my eyes as she shows me our history of all things enchanted, my many incarnations a

seeing all the young servant girl in France, all daughter gorgeous girls reminded me of how lucky I was… it was nice to be back… eyes wide, I gape, never having seen that life before, I think back, in class and wonder.

Part: 9

But she just smiles, gazes growing warmer as she shows me the highlights of that time, a quick clip of the moment we met at a gallery opening in Amsterdam-our first kiss just outside of the gallery that very same night. Presenting only the most-Dadaistic moments and sparing my

death, which always, inevitably, comes before we can progress.

-And-

After watching all those beautiful moments unfold, her unabashed love for me laid bare to see, I gaze into her eyes, answering her question when I think: Of course, it is enough. You have always been enough.

Then closing them in shame when I add: But am I enough for you?

Finally admitting the truth-my fear that she will soon tire of the gloved handholding, the telepathic embrace,

and seek out the real thing in a normal girl with safe DNA.

She then nods, gloved fingers cupping my chin as she gathers me into a mental embrace so warm, so safe, so comforting, all my fears slip away.

Responding to the apology in my gaze as she leans forward, lips at my ear as she says, ‘Good. Now that that is settled, about Naddalin...’

As I make my way toward history class, I am wondering which will be worse-seeing Naddalin or Mr. Milley?

Because while I have not seen or spoken to either of them since last Friday when my entire world fell apart there is no doubt, I left them both on a strange note.

My last contact with Milley consisted of me going all sentimental and not only confiding my psychic powers-which is something I never do-but also encouraging her to date my aunt Sabine-which is something I am seriously beginning to regret.

And as awful as that was, it is only rivaled by my last moments with Naddalin when I aimed my fist at her navel chakra, determined not just to kill

her but to obliterate her. And I would have too-except for the fact that I totally choked, and she got away. And even though in retrospect that worked out for the best, I am still so angry with her, who is to say I will not try again?

But the truth is, I know I will not try again. Besides not just because Naddalin spent the whole of English class telepathically lecturing me on how revenge is never the answer, how karma is the only true justice system, and plenty more blah- blah- blah- like that-but mostly because it is not right.

Even though Naddalin tricked me in the very worst way, leaving me

no reason to ever trust her again-I still do not have the right to kill her over it.

It will not solve my problem. Will not change a thing. Even though she is awful, evil, and everything that adds up to bad, I still do not have the right to-do that… She slithers up beside me, all blond tousled hair, water's edge blue eyes, and shiny white teeth relaxed stretching her strong, tanned arm across the classroom door, barring me from getting inside.

And that is all it takes.

But I will not… even if… even if…

I promised Naddalin I could get myself safely to and from class without resorting to that.

‘So, tell me, Ever, how was your weekend? Did you and Naddalin enjoy a nice reunion? Was her ability to survive you-by chance?’

I clench my fists by my sides, visualization how she would look like nothing more than a heap of designer clothes and a pile of dust, despite the vow of nonaggression I took.

She then nods, gazes fixed on mine, lowering her voice to a whisper

as she adds, ‘Not to worry though, you won’t be alone for long.

Once the proper mourning period ends, I’ll be happy to step in and fill up the void of her loss.’

I focus on my breath, keeping it slow and steady as I take in the strong, tan, muscular arm blocking my path, knowing all it would take is one well-placed karate chop to break it in half.

‘Hell, even if you did manage to hold back and keep her alive, all you have to do is say the word, and I’m right by your side.’ She grins, eyes grazing over me most intimately.

‘But no need to answer too quickly or commit yourself yet. Take if you like, Because, Continually, I assure you, unlike Naddalin, I am a man who can wait. Besides, it’s just a matter of time before you come looking for me anyway.’

‘There’s only one thing I want from you.’

I narrow my gaze until everything surrounding us blurs. ‘And that’s for you to leave me alone.’ Herat rising to my cheeks as her gaze deepens to a leer.

‘’Farid not, darling.’’ She laughs, looking me over and shaking her head. ‘Trust me, you want way more than that. But not to worry, it is like I said, I will wait for as long as it takes.

It is Naddalin I am worried about. And you should worry too. From what I saw those last hundred years, she is an impatient man. Bit of a hedonist. I didn’t wait for much of anything as far as I could tell.’

I- Emmah, swallow hard and strive to keep calm, reminding myself not to fall for her bait. Naddalin has a knack for finding my weakness, my

psychological strength, and many lives to exploit it.

‘Don’t get me wrong, she’s always been one to keep up entrances- wearing the armbands that are back and white stripes, appearing inconsolable at the wake-but trust me, Ever, the moss hadn’t time to adhere to her shoe before she was back on the lurk.

Looking to drown her sorrows in whatever or should I say whomever- her could. And even though you prefer not to believe it, take it from someone who has been there all along. Naddalin

waits for no one. And he certainly never waited for you.'

I take a deep breath, filling my head with words, music, mathematical equations stretching far beyond my skills, anything to drown out the words that are like prudently honed arrows aimed straight for my heart.

'Yep.'

'Saw it with my own eyes, I did!'

Smiling as she slips into a thick cockney pronunciation and backs out again. 'Haven saw it too.

It broke her poor heart.

Willing to take her back no matter where she had been, no questions asked.

Though, unlike me-and, I am afraid, quite unlike you have not loved was unconditional. Which, let us face it, is something you'd never do.'

'That's not true!' I cried, voice hoarse, and very dry, as though it is the first time that I have used it all day- it was so bad.

'I've had Naddalin since the moment we met-I-' I stop, knowing I should not have started. It is useless to engage in the fight.

‘Sorry, darlin,’ but you are wrong. You have never- ever had Naddalin at all. A pure kiss here, a bit of sweaty hand-holding there-’ Her shrugs, gaze contemptuously.

‘Forever, you think some pathetic attempts at second base can satisfy an avaricious, self-absorbed, self-indulgent bloke like her? For four hundred years no less?’

Part: 10

I swallow hard, forcing a calm I do not own when I say, ‘That’s a lot further than you ever got with Haven.’

‘No thanks to you,’ he spits, harsh gaze on mine. ‘But it’s like I said, I’m a man who can wait.’

‘Naddalin is not.’

She shakes her head.

‘Shame you’re so-o strongminded to play hard to get. You and I are a lot more alike than you think. Both of us pining after someone we’ll never truly have-’

‘I could-’ I suck in my breath, not wanting her to know what only Naddalin and I know, that targeting an immortal’s weakest chakra, one of the

body’s seven energy centers, is the quickest way to obliterate them.

‘I could kill you right now,’ I whisper, voice shaky, hands trembling, even though I promised Naddalin I would not do them, even though I know better.

‘Slug me in my sacral center, perhaps?’

‘You could what?’ She smiles at me, faces impending so close her breath chills my cheek.

I gape, wondering where she could’ve erudite that.

Nonetheless, she just giggles, shaking her head saying, ‘Do not forget, Liv, Naddalin was under my spell.

which means she told me everything, answered every question I am asked-including a good bit about you.’

She got me… Right where it counts. And do not think she does not know it.

I stand there, refusing to react, figured out to appear composed, unruffled-but it is too late.

‘No worries, Liv. ‘I’m having far too much fun watching you squirm to attempt something like that.

Just a moment later- ‘I’ve no plans to go after you- she said.’

Besides, it will not be long ’til you are squirming beneath me.

Or even on top of me. Either will do.’ she laughs, her eyes on me, gazing at me in a way so knowing, so intimate, so deep, my stomach can’t help but have.

‘I’ll leave the details to you. But no matter how much you may want to, you will not go after me either. Mostly

because I do have what you want. The cure to the antidote for what you suffers from. I assure you of that, said Naddalin. You are just going to have to find a way to earn it, she also said. You’re just going to have to show me how bad you want it.’

I gape, dry-mouthed and slack-jawed, remembering last Friday when Naddalin claimed the very same thing, to me saying that she likes owned me, and in a way, I am okay with that.

So-o distracted by Naddalin awakening- I forgot all about it ’til now- to have it type down as another chapter in the book of my life.

I- Emmah press my lips together as my gaze meets, she is… awe- my hope rising for the first time in days.

knowing it is just a matter of time until the antidote is mine. I just need to find a way to get it from her.

‘Oh, look at that.’ She grins. ‘Seems you forgot all about our date with destiny.’

Part: 11

She lifts her arm and I start to plow through, then she lowers it just as quickly, laughing as she locks me in place.

‘Deep breaths,’ her coos, lips grazing the edge of my ear, fingers sliding over my shoulder, leaving an icy cold wake in their path. ‘No need to panic. No need to get all spaz-ed out o'er.

I’m sure that between us, we can come to some sort of mutual agreement, find a way to work something out.’

I narrow my gaze, disgusted by the price that she is set, words slow and cautious when I say, ‘Nothing you could ever say or do could convince me to sleep with you!’ just as Milley opens

the door, allowing the entire class to overhear.

‘Whoa’ Naddalin smiles, hands raised in pretend admission of defeat as she backs into the room. ‘Who said anything about bumping’ ugliest, pal?’

She will throw her head back and laugh, allowing her creepy Ouroboric tattoo to flash in and out of view. ‘I mean, not to disappoint you, darlin,’ but if it’s a good shag I’m after, virgins about the last place I’d look!’

I storm toward my desk, cheeks burning, gaze fixed on the floor, spending the next forty minutes

cringing as my classmates burst into hysterics every time Naddalin directs a disgusting wet smooch sound my way, despite Milley's many tries to quiet them down.

-And-

The moment the bell rings, I make a run to the door. Frantic to get to Naddalin before Naddalin can convince Naddalin will push her too far and she will snap-an an act neither of us can afford now that Naddalin holds the key.

Nonetheless- just as I turn the knob I hear, 'Ever? Got a minute?' Her

mocking laughter trailing behind me as I turn toward Milley to see what she wants.

I pause, classmates piling up behind me, eager to get to the hall where they can follow Naddalin's lead and taunt me some more.

'I did it.' Her smiles, posture stiff, voice anxious, but still eager for me to know.

I shift uncomfortably, moving my bag from one shoulder to the next, wishing I had taken the time to learn remote viewing so I could keep an eye

on the lunch tables and ensure Naddalin sticks to the plan.

‘I approached her- just like you told me to.’ She nods.

I squint, returning my focus to her, gut-churning as I begin to understand. I saw her the morning on the day had passed. We even talked for a while, and-’ she shrugs, gazes drifting away, obviously still very taken by the event. I stand before her, breathless, knowing I must stop it, whatever it takes before it gets out of hand.

‘And you were right. She is nice to me. I probably shouldn’t tell you but we’re having dinner tonight.’

I nod, numb, shell-shocked, the words glancing at me as I peer into her energy and watch it unfold in her head:

She is standing in the line of the cafeteria massive hall with all its stained-glass windows and gothic feel of a castle, minding her own business until Milley approaches-causing her to turn and grant her a smile that’s- that’s- shamefully flirtatious!

Except that there is no shame at all. Those two could not have been

happier. At least not on Sabine's part. Nor Milley for that matter. No, shame is all mine.

That cannot happen. For too many reasons to mention the dinner can never take place. One of them being that she is not just my aunt, but my guardian, my caretaker, my only living relative in the entire world!

And another, even more urgent reason, is the fact that thanks to my pathetic, maudling, overly sentimental, an ill-advised moment of weakness last Friday, Milley knows I am psychic while she does not!

I have gone to great lengths to keep my secret from her, and there is no way I am going to be out by my love-struck history teacher of enchanted.

But just as I am about to tell her that she absolutely cannot, under any circumstances whatsoever, take my aunt to dinner and reveal any information I might have accidentally admitted during a weak moment when I was sure I would never see her again, she clears her throat and says, ‘Anyway, you should get to lunch before it’s too late. I didn’t mean to keep you the long, I just thought-’

‘Oh, no, it’s okay,’ I say. ‘I just-’

But she does not let me finish. Pushes me out the door as she waves me away, saying, ‘Go on now. To find your friends. I just thought I should thank you, that’s all.’

When I get to the lunch table, I sit beside Naddalin, relieved to find everything as normal as any other day. Naddalin’s gloved hand squeezing my knee as I quickly scanned the campus, looking for Naddalin as she thinks: she is gone.

Gone? I gape, hoping her means gone as in not around, as opposed to going as in a pile of dust.

But Naddalin just laughs, the smooth melodious sound reverberating from her head to mine. Not annihilated. I assure you. Just-absent-that is all. I drove off a few minutes ago with some guy I've never- ever seen before.

Did you talk…?

Did she try to invite you?

Naddalin shakes her head, her eyes peering into mine as I add: Good. Because we cannot afford to go after her no matter what! She has the antidote! She admitted it! This means all we must do now is find a way to-

constantly. She frowns… You cannot believe her!

This is what Naddalin does. She lies and manipulates everyone around her. You must stay away from her- she is using you-her cannot be trusted- I just shake my head.

Part: 12

I can feel it.

The time is different. And I need Naddalin to feel it too. She's not lying-seriously-her said- Not even finishing the thought before Haven leans forward, eyes darting between us as she says, 'Okay, that's it. Just what is

going on here? Seriously, enough already.'

I turn, noticing how her friendly yellow aura beams in such sudden sharp contrast to the deliberate harshness of her all-black ensemble. Knowing she means no ill will though she is definitely- disturbed by us.

'Completely, and entirely- It's like you guys have creepy way of communicating. Like twins speak or something. Only yours is silent. …And eerier.'

I shrug and sit there with my lunch, going through the motions of

unwrapping a sandwich, I've no plans to eat, figured out to hide just how alarmed her question has made me feel.

Knocking my knee against Naddalin's, telepathically urging her to step in and handle since I've no idea what to say.

'Don't pretend it's not happening.' Her eyes narrow in suspicion. 'I've been watching you guys for a while now, and it's starting to creep me out.'

'What's creeping you out?' She gazes up from her phone, but only for a

moment before she is back to texting again.

‘Those two.’ She points to a short, black painted nail with a chunk of pink frosting stuck to its tip. ‘I swear, they get stranger every day.’

Naddalin nods, setting down her phone as she takes a moment to look us over. ‘Yeah, I’ve been meaning to mention that. You guys are weird.’ She laughs.

‘Oh, and the whole glove thing?’ She shakes her head and purses her lips. Showing her hand looking all

cracked with fishes and red. ‘So not working for you, I said jokingly.’

Haven frowns, annoyed by my joke when she is trying to be grave.

‘Laugh all you want,’ she says, gaze steady, unwavering. ‘But something’s up with those two. I may not know what, but I will figure it out. I will find the underlying cause of it. You’ll see- you’ll see.’

-And-

I’m just about to speak when Naddalin shakes her head and swirls her red drink, leaning toward Haven as

she says, ‘Don’t waste your time. It’s not as sinister as you think.’

She then smiles, gazes fixed on me.

‘We’re practicing telepathy powers of mind-reading, that’s all.’

‘Attempting to read each other's minds in place of talking all the time.’

‘So, we stop getting in trouble in class over it took over the face we take over each other's bodies and movements too at times, a real headache for the professors.’

She snorts, causing me to squeeze my sandwich so hard the mayonnaise oozes out and squirts grossly out the backside. Gaping at my significant other who has just arbitrarily decided to break our number one rule- do not tell anyone who we are or what we can do! This is something we worked hard to do, looking at the library in the restricted section of dark magic.

Calming only slightly when Haven rolls her eyes and says, ‘Please. I’m not an idiot.’

‘Wasn’t implying you were.’ Naddalin smiles. ‘It’s quite real, I assure you. Would you like to try?’

I freeze, body solid, unmoving, as though seeing a disaster on the side of the road-only the disaster is me.

‘Close your eyes and think of a number between one and ten.’ She nods, sincere gaze meeting her. ‘Focus on that number with all of you might. See it in your mind as clearly as you can, and silently repeat the sound of it repeatedly, got it?’

She shrugs, brows merging as though in deep concentration. Though

Choosing to concentrate on blue instead of a random number like Naddalin said.

All it takes is a glance at her aura, morphing into a dark deceitful green, and a brief- peeks- at her thoughts to see she is only pretending.

She was holding her ground as she rubs her chin and shakes her head, saying, I glance at them, ‘I don’t seem to be getting anything. Are you sure you’re thinking of a number between one and ten?’ Knowing she is baiting her, sure that her one in ten chances of hitting the right number works too much in her favor.

She nods, deepening her focus on a beautiful shade of pulsating blue.

‘Then we must have our wires a-crossed.’ She shrugs. ‘I’m not getting a number at all.’

‘Try me!’ Emmah abandons her phone, and her books and wand and leans toward Naddalin.

Eyes barely closed, thoughts hardly focused before Naddalin gasps, ‘You’re going to Haven?’

She shakes her head also.

Part: 13

(A week back)

‘Three… For your data, the number was three.’ She rolls her eyes and leers. ‘And everyone knows I’m going to France. So nice try…’

‘Everyone but me,’ Naddalin says, jaws clenched, face gone suddenly pale.

‘Well, I’m sure everyone has told you-you of all. You know, telepathically.’ she laughs, returning to her phone again, saying ‘sometimes old school kicking it is not the way to go anymore I prefer these,’ and she held up the phone, that links all the magical networks together.

I peer at Naddalin, wondering why he is so upset over the trip. I mean, yes, so she used to live there, at one time when she was alive- after her boyfriend passed away in an industrial accident or something like that- she was vague about did not want to say… all that much, she said she was in her late 20's. she said something odd on her tombstone and it read- (I have not stuck with me all my whole life, so there-) and I got what it meant. Yet it said, 'I will live on forever…' or something like that, or 'I don't need you!' - 'Or even suck on that!' Like- I

thought that is what it may have said- but- but Nah- it can’t be- yet maybe?

…It is a cracked heart-shaped stone…

Part: 14

But- but that was hundreds of years ago, and the stone is crumbling and reads the rest has disintegrated to dust into just the wind!

I squeeze her hand, urging her to look at me, but she just stares at Haven with that same stricken look on her face.

~*~

‘Nice try with the whole telepathy angle,’ Haven says, swiping her finger a-crossed the top of her cupcake until it is coated with strawberry frosting, and she was licking her finger and kissing the end of it too.

‘But I’m afraid you’re going to have to try a little harder than that. All you have managed to prove is that you guys are even weirder than I thought. But no worries, I will find the underlying cause of it. I’ll expose your dirty little secret before long.’

I hold back a nervous laugh, hoping she is just messing around, then

peering into her mind only to see that she is serious.

‘When are you leaving?’ Naddalin asks.

But only to appear conversational, has already uncovered the answer in her head.

‘Soon, but not soon enough,’ she thought, eyes lighting up, as she stared the look at her. ‘Let the countdown begin!’

Naddalin nods, gaze unstiffening as she says, ‘You’ll love this.

Everyone loves it, France is a lovely, delightful place.’

‘You’ve been…?’

…?...

I and Haven both ask at the same time.

Naddalin nods- ‘I’s have,’ gaze far away in the back of her on the mind and thought looking- blank to us looking at her color fading from her eyes. ‘I lived there once a long time ago.’

‘That’s what we gathered…’ they both said it unanimously!

Haven glances between us, eyes narrowed again when she says, ‘Jaylynn and Naddalin lived there too, around the same time, she looks at her one eyelid squinting.’

Naddalin shrugs, expression noncommittal, as though the connection means nothing to her.

‘Well, don’t you think that’s a little strange? All of you living there at the same time, in the same place, then all of you ending up here-within months of each other?’ She leans toward her, abandoning her cupcake and letting it drop in search of some answers.

She just sips her blue drink and lifts her shoulders again, as though it is hardly worth going into, in the past she thought, to her, in through conversation.

But Naddalin's solid, refusing to cave or do anything that might give it away.

'Is there anything I should see while I'm there?' Haven asks, more to break the tension than anything else. 'Anything that shouldn't be missed?'

Naddalin squints, pretending to think, even though the answer comes quickly.

~*~

‘All of France is worth seeing… yes is it not?’

But you should check out the Ponte Vecchio, which is the first bridge to cross the Arno River and the only one left standing after the war- where every inch of Frances was covered in their blood.

Oh, and we must visit the Galleria dell’ Accademia which houses Michelangelo’s David among other important works, and perhaps the-’

‘Definitely hitting David,’ Emmah says wanting this so badly.

‘We… yes, we're taking you to a girl- surprise!’

‘We did not want to tell you.’

‘As well as the bridge, and the famous ll Duomo, and all the other items that make every travel guide top ten lists, but I am more absorbed in the smaller, off- the- beaten path kind of places- you know, where all the cool Florentines go.

Naddalin was raving about the one place, I forget the name, but it is supposed to house some incomprehensible revitalization

artifacts, paintings, and stuff few people know about.

Did you get anything like that? Or even clubs, shopping, that kind of thing?'

Naddalin looks at her, gaze so intense it sends a chill down my spine.

'Nothing offhand,' she says, trying to soften the look through her voice betrays a definite edge.

'Though any place that claims to house great art but isn't in the guidebook is probably a fake. The antiquities market is loaded with forgeries.

You shouldn’t waste your time on that when there are so many other, far more interesting things to see.’

Haven shrugs, bored by the conversation and already back to texting again. ‘Whatever,’ she mumbles, thumbs tapping quickly. ‘No worries. Naddalin said she’d make me a list.’

(Back home)

‘I’m amazed by the progress you’ve made- Dariez.’ Naddalin smiles. ‘You learned all on your own?’

She nods, and gazing around the small, empty room, pleased with me

for the first time in weeks, when I walked into the tiny house.

The moment Naddalin mentioned she wanted to rid the place of all the overly slippery furniture, that was cheap she had filled it with during Naddalin’s reign of fear, I was on it, to make this place fit for to young lady’s- all cute and such.

Aiming at each piece with such unchecked enthusiasm that-well-I am not even sure where it went. All I know is it is no longer there I want to be-and she points at the old home she was half-grown in- and you were right.

‘Looks like you’re no longer in need of my lessons. She shakes her head, saying you're wringing I need you more now than ever.’

‘Don’t be so sure.’ I said back quickly.

I turn, smiling as I push her dark wavy hair off her face with my newly gloved hand, hoping we will get that cure from Naddalin soon, or at least produce a less hockey alternative. Dariez a good kid… you will do fine.

‘I have no idea where all this stuff even went-not to mentioned, how I can’t possibly fill up space, even more,

when I have no clue where I am stashing all the stuff you used to have and me before getting all this.'

Reaching for her hand a second too late and frowning as she walks over to the window- I feel as if I have lost my sister.

'The furniture'-she gazes out at her manicured lawn, voice low and deep-' is right back where it started, what seemed like forever ago, yet was only about a year.

'I don't like change-' she said- out of breath.

Returned to its original state of pure vibrating energy with the potential to become anything at all. She looks in the glass ball- and sees her new life coming.

And as for the rest-' She shrugs, the strong lines of her shoulders rising ever so slightly before settling again. 'Well, it hardly matters anymore, does it? I do not need it now.'

I stare at her back, taking in her lean form, her casual stance. Doubting how she could be so-o blasé in reclaiming the precious artifacts of her past… -The pictures of her in the plain pink dresses back in the day, the

astride a rearing white stallion-not to mention all the other amazing relics dating back centuries.

‘Nonetheless, those objects are priceless, see her life now within mine forever! You must get them back, don’t you? They can never be replaced, yet you can with new lives, can’t you?’

‘It’s all energy!’ She squeals.

~*~

‘Ever so, relax. It’s just stuff.’ Her voice firmly resigned, as she turns toward me again. ‘None of it has any real meaning. The only thing that means anything is you.’

And even though the sentiment is undeniably sweet and heartfelt, it does not affect me in the way that it should.

The only thing she seems to care about these days is apologizing for her karma and me. ‘But that’s where you’re wrong. It’s not just stuff- too.’

Oh, I sorry, I felt so bad hugging her from the one side.

And while I am perfectly fine with those inhabiting the number one and two spots on her list, the problem is the rest of the page is blank.

I move toward her, voice wiles, wheedling, hoping to reach her and make her listen the time.

And just like that, my mind is ripped into another time and place…

(Back into a week into the trip)

It is history for God's sake, we need to get books and have them signed, it was said this man write 30 books in one year, yet I am not sure if he was still alive! I so he would be over 90 now, you can't just shrug it off as though it's nothing more than a box of old tired books, of tired old objects you donate to Goodwill, I thought they were

worth remembering- like the one about a would lose without color or feeling, or the one about a girl that fought for her place, as an equal- the youngest over her class.'

Look at this thing, the covers are all tattered, and the pages small.

She then looks at me, gazes softening as she trails the tip of her gloved finger from my temple to my chin. 'I thought you hated my 'dusty old room' as you once called it.'

'People change, and so did I.' I shrug, thank about that asking why?

Wishing, not for the first time, that she would change back to the Naddalin, I knew before she was her-

‘And speaking of change, why are you so freaked by my ’s trip to France?’

Noting the way, she hardens at the mere mention of the word.

‘Is it because of the whole Haven and Nevaeh- become Naddalin thing of remembering the past- and not wanting to? The connection you don’t want her to know about?’

Yet were there the good times- I do not know…? She thought…

She looks at me for a moment, lips parting, about to speak, then she turns away and mumbles insanely, ‘I’m hardly what you’d call freaked.’

‘You know what…?

You are right.

For a normal person, that was hardly what you would call freaked.

But for the girl who is always the coolest, calmest one in the room-all it takes is the slight narrowing of your eyes and the most minute clenching of your jaw to know you’re upset.’

She sighs, eyes searching mine as she moves toward me again. ‘You

saw what happened in France.' She then squints. 'Despite all its virtues, it's also a place of unbearable memories, ones I'd rather not explore.'

I swallow hard shaking looking into her past- like a faded movie, remembering the images with her, I viewed in looking deep into her memories, lost in her mind, 'like a penny on the floor… worthless- my depression a sickness that keeps me, spring-like atop- my mind turning, my curse- or just my illusion? Until my death, until we part for better or for worse- locked in your heart-shaped box forever, I thought or was thinking to

note but decillions, what little time we spent lost in my mind forever- whatever never mind.’ -Naddalin is hiding in a small dark cupboard, watching as her parent was murdered, seeing it along with me, she and I shared recalling the moment, back when she was in her playpen.

By thugs’ intent on obtaining the elixir-then later, abused as a ward of the church until the Black Plague swept through France and she encouraged Haven and the rest of the orphans to drink the immortal juice, hoping only to heal and having no idea it would grant eternal life-and I cannot

help but feel like the world's worst girlfriend for bringing it up.

'I prefer to focus on the present.' She nods, gesturing around the large empty room. 'And right now, I need your help furnishing the space. I am starting to like a nice, clean, contemporary look when shopping for home decor.

-And-

Though- I was thinking of leaving it more than empty, to emphasize the size of the rooms- that is well very tiny, I suppose we should try-' I gasp, practically choking on the word

as my voice raises several octaves at the end, think that this girl is now a woman!

‘I’m selling the house- in a year and moving on with my life.’ She shrugs. ‘I thought you would understand?’

But- you can your one of us now…

I gaze around, longing for that ancient velvet sofa with the lumpy cushions, knowing it would give the perfect landing for when my body with I am so tired I collapse, and my head quietly explodes, for all the chatter-

that it must here and there are no ways of to turn them off- they just keep babbling in my mind. I need to have a real-life with real- real- things you no- like all thing that is really- REAL, like real friends too, not just the fantasy world that you refuse to see that is not a reality.

‘Don’t look so upset. Nothing is changed It is just a house. A seriously under the oversized house, I need to move on from. And just like that she was gone and said OKAY if that is what you want Dariez… and Naddalin vanished right before her eyes. Nonetheless, I just stood there instead,

determined to keep it together. Gazing at my ridiculously gorgeous girlfriend of the last years as though it was the first time we had met. Besides, I have needed all the space anyway, I have a new boyfriend, as you may or may not know me and Stan are going to have a baby. they're never going to be enough rooms or rooms for three.'

'And what exactly are you planning to replace it with, then? A tent?'

'I just thought I'd move in with him, that's all.' Her gaze is pleading, begging me to understand, I did yet I thought she was throwing her new life

away that I got for her, ‘Nothing sinister, Ever- yet a way of what could be power- and taking my place someday- ever one said the next. ‘Nothing meant to hurt you, but I don’t want it’

I did not say- yet I thought you are stuck with regardless, you are hexed, and at that point, I was out of her mind- for good- yet them- they were in it forever, and I was not going to stop it now.

I was studying her closely, wondering what has gotten into her, wanting to just say it was all over, and where they will end up without her- yet

she said to me- he is looking for innocents and he has found it- so-o go-o.

‘I mean, Naddalin, if you’re seriously looking for a fight, I don’t want it, why not just manifest something in your crazy head about how wrong I am and can go on?

I flick my gaze over her, moving from her glorious heart of longish dark glossy hair to her perfect rubber flip-flop-shod feet, remembering how, not so long ago, I longed to be normal again, just like everyone else. But now that I am getting used to my powers, I do not see the point.

‘What’s this really about- I thought?’ I squint, feeling more than a little betrayed.’

‘I mean, you’re the one who got me here.’ Oh, I was- mortified.

You are the one who made me the- way- I am.

Right- and now that I am finally adjusted, you decide to jump ship?

‘Seriously! Why are you doing?’

But instead of answering, she just closes her eyes.

Projecting an image of the two of us laughing and happy, frolicking on

a beautiful, black-sand beach- remember all the good times. Saying this is it… thanks for the memories. But I just shake my head and cross my arms tighter, refusing to play until my questions are answered, about her and them…

She sighs and stares out the window of the tiny home for the last time looking back at me with the sun shining brightly, then turning toward me when she says, ‘I’ve already told you, my only recourse, my only way out of the hell making- as I should have, it all karma- and I want what I lost.

And the only way to do that is to relinquish the manifesting, the high life, the big-spending, and all the other extravagances- I have indulged myself in for the last hundred years, so I can live the life of an ordinary citizen, too. I understand, Honest, hardworking, and humble, with the same day-to-day struggles as anyone else- if not more- go for it.’

Intermission-

Your times are limited, so do not be it… living someone else's life, that is what my tombstone said along with 1991 to 2094, I have seen a century- yet stayed the age of 14, all those days after my ending.

~Emmah~

Part: 15

Portion: 1

I stare at her, replaying her words in my head, hardly believing what I just heard. ‘And how exactly are you planning to do that?’ I squint. ‘Seriously. In your one century of living, have you ever even held a real job?’

But even though I am dead sober and not at all joking, she throws her head back and laughs like I was.

Eventually calming down enough to say, ‘You reliably think no one will hire me?’

‘I could have had a job if I wanted to but, back home how- and when could I have- you’re working for a town that thinks your less then they, in every way you could think of, the kids you work with don’t like you and their dad that is now your boss thinks you’re a waste of life; so, get a job- yah-right.’

She shakes her head and laughs even harder. ‘Forever, please. Don’t you think I’ve been around long enough to have improved a few skills?’

~*~

I start to respond, wanting to explain that while it is truly remarkable

to watch her paint, better than Picasso with one hand while at the same time outdoing Van Gogh with the other by cutting… I do not think that will help her land that coveted barista position at the Starbucks on the corner, yet something about girls well never changes, just like every girl has that one boy that is her bitch, and I get that I had mine and she now has hers… so-o!

Nonetheless, before I can say it, she is standing beside me, moving with such speed and grace all I can manage is, ‘Well, for someone who’s turned her back on her gifts, you still

move fast, for a girl that doesn’t want to see any more of her past even if it's showing in the painting.’

Aware of that warm wonderful tingle swarming- turning and swimming like within my skin as she slips her arms around my waist and pulls me close to her chest, carefully circumventing skin-on-skin contact, yet it could not be helped.

-And-

‘Besides what about telepathy?’

I murmur.

Thinking- Your mind spends about 70% of its time replaying

memories and creating scenarios of perfect moments. Waiting- like a painting- is linked to depression, at times- and shows the picture within. Time spent waiting for something that may never happen is mentally painful. The best feeling in the world is knowing that you mean something to someone. This can add years to your life. Sometimes- good people make bad choices. It does not mean they are bad people; it means they are human. Yet we are not human.

Then the talking started up-

'Are you planning to ditch that too- for your B*TCH?'

So, overcome by her juxtaposition, I can barely eke out the words.

‘I’ve no plans to ditch anything that brings me closer to you,’ she says, gaze on mine, steady and still.

‘As for the rest-’ SHE- shrugs, glancing around the large space before finding me again. And ‘Tell me, what matters more, NEVER- Ever? The size of my house or the size of my heart?’

I bite my lip and advert my gaze, the truth of her words left me feeling small and ashamed- like first

time sex- when your 13 and can now consent.

I swallow hard, focusing on anything but her, thinking back on my life and all the flashbacks that come.

It is not that I care about her past, I mean, if I want those things then fine, I will just clear them myself. An instant mood changes from happy to sad usually shows that you are missing someone, I have noticed…

Even so then again even though they are not important- THERE LIKE- JUST- moments lost in time, if I am going, to be honest, then I must

admit they were part of the preliminary attraction-adding to her sleek, shiny, mysterious persona, that lured me in right away. Then when I finally am held at her again, standing before me, stripped bare of all the usual dazzle and flash, honed down to the very essence of who SHE is, I realize she is still the same, warm, wonderful girl that he has been all along.

Which just proves her point even more. None of that other stuff matters. None of it has anything to do with her soul at all.

I smile, suddenly remembering the one place where we can be

together-safe and secure and protected from harm.

Reaching for her gloved hand as I grasp it in mine, saying, ‘Come on, I want to show you something,’ and pulling her along.

At first, I was concerned she would refuse to visit a place that not only requires a certain amount of magic for entry, but that is nothing but magic once you arrive.

Formerly just after landing in that vast sweet-smelling field, she wipes the BUTT of her jeans and offers her hand, gazing all around as SHE

says, ‘Wow, I don’t think I was ever able to make the portal so-o quickly.’

‘Please, you’re the one who taught me.’

I smile, gazing at the meadow of pulsating flowers and shivering trees, noting how everything here is reduced to its absolute purest form of beauty and energy.

I tilt my head back, closing my eyes against the warm hazy glow that she makes with me within the shimmering mist of the day.

Remembering the last time, I was here, how I danced with a manifest

Naddalin in the very same field, delaying the moment when I would have to let go.

~*~

‘So, you’re okay with being here?’ I ask, unsure just how far the ban on magic outspreads. ‘You’re not mad?’ I WANT TO MAKE SURE THAT SHE IS *comfortable*!

She then shakes her head and takes my hand.

‘I never grow tired of seeing THIS world WITH ITS UNWORLDLY COLORS AND CREATURES.’

It’s a display of loveliness and potential in its unadulterated form.’

We make our way through the pasture, sustained by the grass just under our feet as our fingers graze the tops of golden wildflowers, that bend and sway alongside us.

Knowing anything is possible in a wonderful place, anything at all, including just maybe-us.

‘I missed them… everything…’

She leers, gazing all around…

‘Not that I reminisce about the last few weeks without it, even still, it

seems like such a long time since we were last here- just like this.'

'It felt strange coming without you,' I say, leading her toward a beautiful Balinese-style bathhouse balanced beside the blue-green tinted stream.

'Though I did discover a whole other side I can't wait to show you. Only later- not now.'

I push the gossamer pink fabric aside and plop onto the soft white cushions, smiling as Naddalin lands right beside me, the two of us lying side

by side, gazing up at the decoratively carved coconut beams.

Heads together, the soles of our feet just a few inches shy-the results of my elixir-fueled growth spurt.

‘What is the…?’

She turns onto her side…

And then I draw the curtains closer with my mind to me and her. Keen to shut out all those environs she and I, so-o we can enjoy our own private space.

‘I saw one on the cover of a travel magazine featuring some exotic resort, and I liked it so much I thought I

would appear one. You know, so we could hang out-and-stuff.'

I prevent my gaze, heart racing, face blushing, knowing I am quite possibly the most pathetic seducer she has met in her one hundred years.

Nonetheless, she just giggles, pulling me so close we just nearly touch.

Separated only by the slimmest veil of shimmering energy, a pulsating screen that hovers between us- allowing us to be near without harming each other.

I close my eyes, surrendering to the wave of warmth and tingle as our bodies come together. Two hearts pumping in perfect unison, reaching, and retreating, expanding, and retracting, the tempo perfectly synchronized as though beating as one.

Everything about it feels so good, so natural, so right, I snuggle closer. Nestling my face in the hollow where her shoulder meets her neck, longing to taste her sweet skin and inhale her warm perfumed scent.

A low moan absconding from deep in her throat as I close my eyes and press into her hips, my tongue

tipped toward her skin, only to have her spring from my reach so fast I am met with a mouthful of the cushion.

I scrambled upright, seeing her move so quickly she is reduced to a blur. Stopping only when she is safely ensconced on the other side of the curtain, eyes blazing, body trembling, as I beg her to tell me what occurred.

I moved near her, wanting to aid.

But then again, just as I get close, she moves, yet, again handheld before her, observation cautioning me away.

‘Don’t touch me,’ she says. ‘Please, stay right where you are. Don’t come any closer.’

‘But why?’

My voice is hoarse, uneven, hands trembling by my side as if I were feeling my old, ways and old life- AS it was when I was getting older- not a young girl any longer.

‘Did I do something where I was mistaken in doing so?

I just thought-well-since we’re here-and since nothing bad can happen-I just thought it would be okay-

if we maybe tried to- re-kindle in reconciliations.'

'Never- Ever, it's not that it was-' she shakes her head, her eyes darker than I have ever seen them- for being sky blue.

So dark the irises are indistinguishable from the pupils, blending right in. 'And who says nothing bad can happen here?' Her tone so edgy, gaze so harsh, it is clear she is traveled an exceptionally long way from her usual state of infallible calm.

I swallow hard and stare at the ground, feeling foolish, ridiculous to think I was so desperate to be with my girlfriend, I risked taking her life- if I do- if they know- if they...

-And-

'I just assumed...'

'I'm sorry.'

My voice fades, knowing very well what happens when one assumes. I don't know what to say.' Not only do you make an ass out of you and me, but in that case, that very same you just might end up dead for the final time with no more lives given to you.

‘I-I guess that- I didn’t think it through and then I shake my head, knowing it’s completely insufficient considering the life-and-death circumstances we’re in.

I mean, if we are not safe here, then where? I pull my shoulders in, wrapping my arms around my waist, trying to make myself smaller, so small I will disappear from her sight.

And yet, I cannot help but wonder precisely what kind of sad thing could happen in a place where magic comes easily, and wounds are healed promptly.

Naddalin looks at me, answering the thought in my head when she says, ‘School contains the possibility of all things. So far, we have only understood something clearly at last, but who is to say there is not a dark side? Maybe it’s not at all what we think.’

I gaze at her, remembering when I first met Neville and Rayne and how they said something similar. Watching as she manifests a beautifully carved wood bench, then motions for me to sit.

‘Come,’ she nods, urging me toward her as I take a seat at the far

end, not wanting to get too close and risk setting her off again.

‘There’s something you need to see something you need to understand. So please just close your eyes and clear your mind of any random thoughts and clutter as best you can. Keeping yourself open and receptive to any visions I send. Can you do that?’

I nod…

My eyes shut tight…

I was doing my best to sweep my mind of such thoughts as- What is going on I thought and thought more

pondering? Is she mad at me- or just mad?

Unquestionably, she is mad at me- I know it!

How could I be so stupid? But how mad is she beyond? Is it possible to change her mind and start over again? My usual paranoid play-list is set on permanent repeat.

But even after clearing it out and waiting for what feels like a reasonable amount of time, all I have gotten so far is a heavy void of dense solid black.

‘I don’t get it,’ I say, opening one eye, and peeking at her.

Nonetheless, she just shakes her head, eyes shut tight, brows merged in concentration, as she endures to focus with all her might.

‘Listen,’ she says at once.

‘And look deep down inside.’

‘Just close your eyes and obtain.’

I take a deep breath and try again, but still, all I get is a foreboding silence and the feeling of black space.

‘Um, I’m sorry,’ I aware, not wanting to upset her but sure that I am missing the point.

‘I’m not getting much of anything other than silence and darkness.’

‘Faithfully,’ she whispers, unfazed by my words. ‘Now please, take hold of my hand and go deeper, delve past the surface using all your senses, then tell me what you see.’

I take a deep breath and do as she ask me to do, reaching for her hand, and pushing past the solid wall of the dark.

…But all- I get is more of the same.

Pending-

While waiting for-

I am sucked into a black hole, limbs flailing, unable to stop or slow down. Free-falling into the darkness, my horrible high-pitched scream the only sound.

And just as I am sure that fall has no end-it stops. The Shriek… The fall… It… all.

Everything…

Leaving me to hang there, released, and suspended. Completely alone in a solitary place with no beginning or end.

Lost in the dark and dismal abyss with no trace of light coming in. Abandoned in the infinite void, a lost and lonely world of permanent midnight. The horrifying comprehension slowly dawning on me- the is where I live now.

Hell, with no escape…!

-Then-

I try to run, scream, cry for help but it is no use.

I am frozen, paralyzed, unable to speak completely alone for all of infinity.

Expressly held apart from everything I know and love-cut off from everything that exists.

Knowing I’ve no choice but to surrender as my mind goes blank and my body limps.

There is no use in fighting when no one can save me.

I stay like that, solitary, eternal, a shadowy awareness creeping upon me, tugging from a place just outside of my reach-

‘Till-

Pending-

I am tugged out of that hell and into Naddalin’s arms, relieved to see her beautiful, anxious face hovering over me.

‘I’m so sorry I thought I’d lost you-I thought you’d never come back!’ She cries, holding me tight, her voice like a sob in my ear.

I cling to her, body shaking, her art racing, clothes drenched with sweat. Never have I felt so isolated before-so disconnected from everything. From every-living-thing.

Hugging her tighter, unwilling to let go, my mind connecting with her, asking why she chose to put me through that.

She pulls away, cupping my face in her hands as her eyes search mine. ‘I’m sorry. I was not trying to punish you, or harm you in any way. I only wanted to show you something, something you needed to experience firsthand to understand.’

I nod, not trusting my voice. Still shaken by an experience so awful it felt like the death of my soul.

‘My God!’ Her eyes widened. ‘That’s it! That is exactly what it is. The soul ceases to exist!’

‘I don’t understand,’ I say, voice hoarse, shaky. ‘What was that horrible place?’

She looks away, fingers squeezing mine when she says, ‘The future, the eternal abyss I’d thought was meant only for me that I’d hoped was meant only for me…’ She closes her eyes and shakes her head. ‘But now I know better. Now I know that if you are not careful, extremely careful-you’ll go there too.’

I look at her, starting to speak, but she cuts me off before- I can get to the words. ‘The past few days I’ve been getting these flashes- glimpses, really- of various moments from my past-both distant and near.’ She looks at me, carefully searching my face.

‘But the moment we came here-’ Her gestures around. ‘It started trickling back, slowly at first until it all came surging forth, including the moments I was under Naddalin’s control.

I also relived my death. Those few brief moments after you broke through the circle before you had me

drink the antidote, as you know, I was dying. I watched my entire life flash before me, a hundred years of unchecked vanity, narcissism, selfishness, and greed.

Like an endless reel of all my actions, every misdeed that I had made accompanied by the impact I had on the mental and physical effect of my mistreatment of others.

And though there were a few decent acts here and there, the majority, well, it amounted to centuries of me focusing on nothing but my self-interest, giving extraordinarily little thought to anything or anyone else.

Focusing solely on the physical world to the detriment of my soul. Leaving me no doubt I was right all along, my karma to blame for what we're going through now.'

She shakes her head and meets my gaze with such unflinching honesty- I want to reach out and touch her, hold her, tell her it will all be okay. But instead, I stay put, sensing there is more, and it is about to get worse.

'Then, now of my death, instead of coming here-' Her voice cracks but she forces herself to continue. 'I-I went to a place the exact opposite of them.

A place so dark and cold it is more like a home than I wanted it to be or thought it could be. Experiencing the same thing you just did. Solitary, suspended, alone-left to stay that way for all of eternity.' She looks at me, willing me to understand. 'It was exactly like you felt. It was as though I was isolated, soulless-with no connection to anything or anyone else.'

I stare into her eyes, an ominous chill blanketing my skin, never having seen her so tired, so jaded, so regretful before.

‘And now I understand the very thing that’s escaped me all these years-’

I pull my knees to my chest, shielding myself from whatever comes next.

‘Only our physical bodies are immortal. Our souls are most certainly not.’

I avert my gaze, unable to look at her, unable to breathe.

‘The is the future you’re facing. The one I’ve granted you, if, God forbid, anything should happen, that is.’

My fingers instinctively fly to my throat, remembering what Naddalin said about my compromised chakra, my lack of discernment and weakness, wondering if there is some way to guard it. ‘But how can, you be sure?’ I look at her as though caught in a dream, some horrible nightmare with no way to escape.

‘I mean, there’s a good chance you’re wrong since it happened so fast. So that was just a temporary state. You know, as I brought you back to life so fast you didn’t have time to make the trip here.’

She shakes her head, her gaze meeting mine when she says, ‘tell me, Ever, what did you see when you died? How did you spend those few moments between the time when your soul left your body and I returned you to life?’

I swallow hard and look away, gazing at the trees, the flowers, the crystal- clear stream flowing nearby- remembering that day I found myself in the very same field.

So, taken by its heady fragrance, its shimmering mist, the all-encompassing feel of unconditional love, I was tempted to linger forever, never wanting to leave.

‘The reason you didn’t see the abyss is that you were still mortal. You had died a mortal’s death. Nevertheless, the moment I had you drink from the elixir, granting you an infinite life, everything changed. Instead of eternity in School or the place beyond the bridge-the Shadowland became your fate.’

She shakes her head and looks away, so deeply mired in her private world of regret I am afraid I will never reach her again. But just as quickly her eyes meet mine when she says, ‘We can live an eternity in the earth plane, you and I together. But if something should

happen, if one of us should die-’ she shakes her head. ‘The abyss is where we’ll go, and we’ll never see each other again.’

I start to speak, desperate to refute it, tell her here is wrong, but I cannot. It is of no use. All I must do is look into her eyes to see the truth.

‘And as much as I believe in the powerful heralding magic of the place- just look at the way it heralded my memory-’ she shrugs and shakes her head.

‘I can’t afford to give in, no matter how safe my desire for you may

seem. It is too risky. Besides we've no impervious it will be any different here than on the earth plane. It is a gamble I cannot afford to take. Not when I need to do everything I can to keep you safe.'

'Keep me innocuous?' I gape hard. 'You're the one who needs saving! It is my fault all the happened in the first place! If I had not-'

'Always, please,' she says, voice harsh, willing me to listen.

'You're in no way to blame. When I think about the way I've lived- the things I've done-' She shakes her head. 'I deserve nothing better, and if

there was any inquiry that my karma was to blame, well, it ends here.

I have spent the better part of hundred years devoting myself to physical pleasure and neglecting my soul-and the is the result-the wake-up call, and inopportunely, I have dragged you along.

So-o makes no mistake, my concern is for you, and you are only. You are my only priority. My life is only important in that- I stay well long enough to protect you from Naddalin and whoever else she might hurt. And that means we can never be together. Never. It’s a risk we can’t take.’

I turn toward the stream, a thousand thoughts storming my brain. Besides, even though I heard everything she just said, even though I qualified the gorge for myself, I still would not change what I am.

‘And the other orphans?’

I whispered, remembering how I counted seven, including Naddalin at one point. ‘What happened to them? Do you know if they turned evil like Naddalin and Haven?’

Naddalin shrugs, rising from the bench and pacing before me. ‘I always assumed they were too old and

feeble by now to ever pose a real threat.

That is what happens after the first one hundred years- you age- some yet slower than the rest. And the only way to reverse the process is to drink the tonic again if you want an end.

Haven amassed it while we were dating and slipped it to Naddalin who eventually learned how to make her own and then passed it to the other.' She then shakes her head more.

'So that's where Haven is now,' I whimper, overcome with remorse when I realize the truth. No matter how

evil she was, she did not deserve that. Nobody does. ‘I sent her here-and-now she’s-’ I shake my head, unable to finish.

‘It wasn’t you who did it, it was me.’

She fills the space beside me, sitting so close there is only a sliver of energy pulsating between us.

‘The moment I made her an immortal, I sealed her fate.’

I was not sure she wanted it or not, yet it was for the best I thought and my selfishness.

‘Just like I did yours.’

I swallow hard, reassured by her warmth along with her wanting to assure me that- I am truly not responsible for sending my number-one enemy through all my lives straight into that hell.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she whispers, gazes full of remorse.

‘I’m sorry- I complicated you in any of them. I should have left you alone should have walked a long time ago. You would’ve been so much better off if you’d never met me-’

I shake my head, unwilling to even visit that place, it is far too late

for looking back or second-guessing. ‘But if we’re destined to be together- then maybe she is our fate.’ Knowing her stays unconvinced the second I read her countenance.

‘Or maybe I’ve forced something that was never meant to be.’ She frowns and looks down. ‘Did you ever think of that?’

I look away, taking in the surrounding beauty, knowing words alone can never- ever change any of them, the only action can help; and fortunate for us, I know just where to begin.

I stand, pulling her up alongside me as I say, ‘Come on. We don’t need Naddalin-don’t need anyone-I to know just the place!’

We head for the Countless Halls of Learning…

Stopping just shy of its steep marble steps as I peer at her, wondering (eager!) her can see what I see-the ever-changing façade that is needed for entry.

‘So, you did find it,’ she says, voice tinged with awe as we watch the revolving collection of the most sacred and beautiful places on Earth.

The Great Pyramids of Giza, the Taj Mahal morphing into the Parthenon, which turns into the Lotus temple, which becomes and so on. Our mutual acknowledgment of its beauty and wonder allowing us into the grand marble hall lined with elaborately carved columns straight out of ancient Greek times.

Things I never thought of living in a small town that was the world to me, yet more to them. Naddalin gazes around, face a mask of absolute wonder as she takes it all in. ‘I haven’t been here since-’

I peered at her, holding my breath, dying to know the details of the last time she was there.

‘Since I came to find you.’

I squint, unsure what that means.

‘Sometimes-’ She looks at me. ‘I was lucky enough to just happen upon you, ending up in the same place at just the right time. Though often I’d have to wait a few years before it was proper to meet.’

‘You mean you were spying on me?’ I gape, hoping it was not as creepy as it sounds. ‘When I was a kid?’

She cringes, averting her gaze when she says, ‘No, not spying, Never-Ever. Please. What do you take me for?’ She laughs and shakes her head. ‘It was more like keeping tabs.

Patiently waiting until the time was right. Nevertheless, the last few times when I was unable to find you, no matter how hard I tried and believe me, I tried, living like a wanderer, itinerant from place to place, sure I had lost you forever-I decided to come here. And I ran into some friends who showed me the way.’

‘Neville and Rayne.’ I nod, neither hearing nor seeing the answer

in her head, but somehow sensing it is true. Overcome by an immediate rush of guilt for failing to even think of them until now. Not even wondering how they might be, where they might be, until a second ago.

'You know them?' She squints, surprised.

I press my lips together, knowing I will have to tell her the rest of the story, the parts I had hoped to abandon.

'They led me here too-' I pause, taking a deep breath and looking away, preferring to take in the room than

meet her quizzical gaze. ‘They were at Ava’s-or at least Rayne was. Neville was out-’ I shook my head and started again. ‘She was out trying to help you when you-’

I close my eyes and sigh, deciding to just show her instead. Everything. All of it. Including the parts, I was too ashamed to put them into words. Projecting the events of that day until there are no more secrets between us. Letting her know how hard they fought to save her, while I was too stubborn, refusing to listen.

But instead of being upset as I feared, she places her hands on my

shoulders, gazing at me with forgiveness as she thinks, what is done is done. We must move forward, there is no looking back.

I swallow hard and meet her gaze, knowing she is right. It is time to get started, but where to begin?

‘It’s better if we split up.’ Her nods, her words a surprise to my ears, and I’m just about to speak when she adds, ‘Ever, think about it. You’re trying to find something to reverse the effects of the elixir I drank, while I’m trying to save you from Shadowland, not the same thing.’

I sigh, disappointed but must agree. ‘I’ll see you back at the house then. My house if that’s okay?’ I place my hand over her and give it a squeeze, reluctant to revisit her depressingly barren room and unsure where she stands on the whole karma curse thing now that her memory is returned.

And no sooner has she nodded and closed her eyes than she vanishes from sight.

So, I take a deep breath and close my eyes too, thinking I need help. I have made a huge and horrible mistake and I do not know what to do. I need to either find an antidote to the

antidote-something that will reverse the effects of what Naddalin's done-or find a way to get to her, convince her to cooperate with me-but only in a way that will not need me to- um- seriously compromise myself in a way I am not comfortable with... if you know what I mean...

Focusing on my intention, replaying the words repeatedly. Hoping it will grant access to the Akashic Records, the permanent record of everything that has is or ever will be done. Praying- I will not be shut out again like the last time- I was here.

But the time, when I hear that familiar buzz, instead of the usual long hallway leading to a mysterious room, I find myself right smack in the middle of a cineplex, its lobby empty, snack bar abandoned, with no clue of what I should do a set of double doors opens before me.

I step into a dark theater with sticky floors, worn seats, and the scent of buttery popcorn permeating the air. Squeezing down the aisle and choosing the best seat in the house, the one halfway down and dead center, I prop my feet on the chair just before me as the lights go dim and a big tub of

popcorn appears in my lap. Watching the red drapes retract as the large crystal screen begins to flicker and flare in a profusion of images that quickly race past.

But instead of the solution I had hoped for, all I got was a series of clips from movies I had already seen. Resulting in a homemade montage of my family's funniest moments, lifted straight from my old life in Oregon and unfolding to a soundtrack that only Riley could make.

Portion: 2

Watching a clip of Riley and me, both of us hamming it up on a homemade stage in our den, dancing and lip-synching for an audience consisting of our parents and dog. Soon followed by an image of Buttercup, our sweet yellow lab. Tongue straining toward her nose, licking like mad, trying to get to the chunk of peanut butter Riley had dabbed there.

And even though it is not at all what I had hoped for, I know it is important all the same. Riley promised she would find a way to communicate with me, assuring me that just because-

I cannot see her anymore does not mean she is not still around.

So, I push my quest aside and sink into my seat. Knowing she is sitting beside me, silent and unseen. Wanting to share the moment, two sisters sharing the home-movie version of what used to be.

By the time I make it back to my room, Naddalin is waiting, sitting on the edge of my bed, cradling a small satin pouch in the palm of her gloved hand.

~*~

‘How long was I gone?’ I asked, plopping down beside her as I squinted at my bedside clock and figured out the math.

‘There’s no time in School,’ she reminds me. ‘But on the earth plane, I’d say you were gone for a while. Did you learn anything?’

I think about the home movies I watched, Riley’s version of ‘The Bloom Family’s Funniest Videos,’ then I shake my head and shrug. ‘Nothing useful. You?’

She smiles, handing over the silk pouch as she says, ‘Open and see.’

I pull on the drawstring, slip a finger inside, and retrieve a black silk cord bearing a cluster of colorful crystals held together by thin gold bands. Watching it catch and reflect the light as I dangle it before me, thinking it is beautiful if not a bit odd.

‘It’s a charm,’ she says, watching me carefully as I take in the individual stones, each of them bearing a different shape, size, and color.

‘They’ve been worn through the ages and are said to hold magical properties for heralding, protection, prosperity, and balance. Though the one, being created solely for you, is

heavy on the protection element since that's what you need.'

I look at her, wondering how they could harp. Then I remember the crystals I used to make the antidote that saved her, and how it really could have worked- if Naddalin had not tricked me into adding my blood to the mix.

'It's unique, assembled, and crafted with your journey in mind. There is not another one like it, not anywhere. I know it doesn't solve our problem, but at least it'll hurt.'

I squint at the bundle of rocks, unsure what to say. About to slip it over my head and give it a go, when she smiles and says, ‘Allow me…’ Gathering my long hair and draping it over my shoulder as she reaches behind me and secures the small golden clasp, before tucking it under my tee where no one can see.

‘Is it a secret?’ I ask, expecting the crystals to feel cold and hard against my skin and astonished to find them quite warm and comforting instead.

~*~

She brushes my hair back over my shoulder, letting it fall just shy of my waist. ‘No, it’s not a secret. Though you should not flaunt it either. I have no idea just how far Naddalin’s advanced, so it’s better not to draw her attention to it.’

‘She knows about the chakras,’ I say, seeing the surprise in her gaze and choosing to omit the fact that she handles that. Having unwittingly revealed all kinds of secrets while under Naddalin’s spell. She feels bad enough already, so there is no reason to make it any worse.

I tap my fingers against the amulet beneath my shirt, surprised by how solid it feels from the outside, compared to the inside, the part that rests on my skin. ‘But what about you? Don’t you need protection too?’ Watching as she unearths a similar amulet from under her long-sleeved tee, smiling as she dangles it before me. ‘How come yours looks so different?’ I ask, squinting at the cluster of sparkling stones.

‘I told you, no two are alike. Just like no two people are alike. I’ve got my issues to overcome.’

‘You have issues?’ I laugh, though seriously wondering what they could be, she is good at everything she does. And I mean everything.

She shakes her head and laughs, a wonderful sound I do not get to hear enough anymore. ‘Believe me, I’ve got my share,’ she says, laughing again.

‘And you’re sure these will keep us safe?’ I press it against my chest, noticing how it feels like a part of me now.

‘That’s the plan.’ She shrugs, getting up from the bed and heading

for the door as she adds, ‘But, Ever, please do us both a favor and try not to put it to the test, okay?’

‘What about Naddalin?’

I ask, taking in her long, lean form as she rests against the jamb. ‘Don’t you think we should produce a plan? Find a way to get her to give us what we need and be done with all the?’

Naddalin looks at me, gaze narrowed on mine. ‘There’s no plan, NEVER- Ever. Engaging with Naddalin is exactly what she wants. We’re better

off finding a solution on our own, without relying on her.'

'But how? Everything we've tried so far has been a total bust.' I shake my head. 'And why should we run ourselves ragged, searching for answers, when Naddalin's already admitted to having the remedy? She said all I have to do is pay the right price and he'll hand it over- how hard can that be?'

'And you're willing to pay her price?' Naddalin asks, voice steady and deep as her dark eyes sweep mine.

I avert my gaze, cheeks hating to a thousand degrees. ‘Of course not! Or at least not the price that you think!’ I bring my knees to my chest and wrap my arms around them. ‘It’s just-’ I shake my head, frustrated at having to plead my case. ‘It’s just that-’

‘She wants to divide us, make us question each other, break us apart. She also wants us to go after her and start a war.

‘NEVER- Ever, the is exactly what Naddalin wants.’ Her jaw tightens, her features harden, before meeting my gaze and softening again.

Then while I promise to do everything in my power to protect you, you must help me- and her too. You've no motive to trust her, she will lie, operate, and make no mistake, it is an extremely dangerous game that she plays.

You should promise you will stay away from her, ignore all her taunts, and will not rise to her bait. I will find a solution. Figure something out. Just please, look to me for the answers, not Naddalin, okay?'

I switch my gaze back to her, an idea beginning to form-one that might work. I press my lips together

and look away, wondering why I should promise any of that when the cure is right there for the taking. Besides, I am the one who caused the situation. I am the one who got us into the mess. So, I should be the one to get us both out. ‘So, we’re clear about Naddalin?’ She tilts her head and lifts her brow, unwilling to leave until I consent.

I nod, just barely, but still enough to convince her to head down the stairs so fast I cannot distinguish her form. The only hint of her having been here are the stones against my chest and the single red tulip she left on the bed.

Thinking in my head it has happened my prophecies- the country with the flag with the star remember that, launched rockets of war for our homeland in the USA, makes me glad to be where I am at, and remember the one that has fought and died for us, like Kristen! Now she is out there fighting with them the man and strong woman, yet once more in a new life, as one of us... the USA, it turns on the rest of the world, and they are turning on us. I foresee a day when like all just become nothing but impressions of just that… imitations!

Part: 16

‘NEVER- Ever?’

Since as nice as it is lying beside Naddalin, the beat of our hearts connecting as one, eventually, it is just not enough. It will never- EVER- NEVER- EVER be enough. I want a normal relationship with my immortal boyfriend- NOT A GIRL! As you could think she is missing something is that I need and want- is she not? One with no walls.

Oh, yes boy- and I will stop at nothing to get it… One where I can genuinely enjoy the feel of skin as opposed to the way I remember it in my head.

(3 hours later, after sleeping in the same bed in the same room, drooling on one another as we sleep, dur-ta-dur- obviously.)

‘Did you eat yet?’

She places her hand on my shoulder as she peers at the screen- I was working on my next part of my lives to story- to add to the book- in my own words, hoping my words would stand the test of time like the girls before me, I find my story lackluster and boarding at times- yet it is the story of my life- like theirs.

-And-

Since I did not prepare, did not guard myself against her touch, that is all it takes to see her version of the infamous girls stand before me, I was part of this all, which, unfortunately, is not so different from Milley's version- the two of them acting all happy and giddy, smiling at each other with an abundance of hope, yet still on the inside nothing has changed.

Then even though she seems happy, and no doubt deserves to be happy especially after all that I have put her through, I still comfort myself with the vision I had a few months back- the one where she ends up with

some cute boy she used to know- from back home when she goes back in time to relive- days gone by- like me too, always looking for more in the past than in the here and now- why?

(THE QUESTION IS WHY?)

Now I am right back where I started. Sober and miserable. I guess by now I should know enough about the loss of realizing that you never really stop missing someone you just learn to live around the huge gaping hole of their absence. Just like Our past may shape us, but it does not define who we become if only that was tried for us. The only thing a person can ever really

do is keep moving forward. Take that big leap forward without hesitation, without once looking back. Simply forget the past and forge toward the future.

I am egotistic, impatient, and a little unconfident. I make mistakes, I am out of control and at times hard to grip.

Nevertheless, if you cannot grip me at my nastiest, then you do not earn me at my finest- wondering if I should say or do something to temper her excitement since it is not like the little flirtation is going anywhere. Nonetheless, knowing I have already

taken too big of a risk by outing myself to Milley, I do not say a word. I cannot afford to tip her off too.

I swivel around in my chair, releasing myself from her grip.

Wanting to avoid seeing anything more than I already have, waiting for her energy stream to fade.

‘Naddalin made me dinner,’ I say, voice steady and low even though it is not exactly true. Unless you count the solution, I drank.

She looks at me, gazes suddenly troubled as it narrows on mine. ‘Naddalin?’ She steps back. ‘Now

there’s a name I haven’t heard in a while.’

I cringe, wishing I had not just put it out there like that. I should have broken her in slowly, gotten her used to the idea of seeing her again.

‘Does the mean you’re back together?’ ‘Yeah, um, we’re still-friendly.’ I shrug. ‘I mean we’re more than friends, we’re more like-’ I shrug, allowing my hair to fall on my face so it is partially hidden. Grasping a chunk and twisting it around, pretending to inspect for split ends even though I no longer get them.

Dating and doomed-destined to spend an eternity in the abyss-madly in love but unable to touch- ‘Well, yes, I mean, I guess you could say we’re back together again.’ Forcing a smile so wide my lips practically split down the middle, but holding it anyway, hoping it will encourage her to join in.

‘And you’re okay with that?’

She runs her hand through her long hair, a shade we used to share the same color until I started drinking the solution which turned mine even lighter- then her hers perches on the edge of my bed, crosses her legs, and drops her portfolio onto the floor-four

bad signs that she is become peaceful in for one of her long, awkward talks.

Her gaze moves over me, taking in my faded jeans, my white tank top, searching for symptoms, hints, clues, telltale signs of adolescent distress.

Having only recently ruled out anorexia and or bulimia when my solution-fueled growth spurt added four inches to my height and bulked up my frame with a thin layer of muscle even though I never work out.

But the time it is not my arrival that has her unnerved, it is me- on-

again-off-again-again-again-again-relationship with Naddalin, that is the issue. And even though that may be true, nothing about Naddalin and my relationship could ever be condensed into a chapter in a book. Having recently finished yet another parenting book claiming that a tumultuous relationship is a major cause for concern.

Like she is somehow too old for you-or-' She shrugs, unable to place it. 'Don't get me wrong, Never- Ever, I like Naddalin, I do.

She is nice and polite, and she is certainly very composed and yet,

there is something about that cool self-assurance, something that seems odd for a young man her age.

First, it was Haven with the whole telepathy thing, and now Jaylynn's taking issue with her maturity and poise.

I push my hair off my face, so I can see her better. She is the second person today who noticed something off about her about us. And even though it is easy enough to explain, the fact that they are even noticing in the first place is what worries me.

‘And while I know there are only a few months between you, she somehow comes off as more experienced. Too experienced.’ She shrugs. ‘And I’d hate for you to feel pressured into doing something you’re not quite ready for.’

I press my lips together and try not to laugh, thinking about how she could not have gotten it more wrong. If I am the innocent maiden being chased by the big bad wolf, never imagining that I am the predator in the tale, dangerously pursuing my prey to the point of risking her life.

‘Since no matter what she may say, you are in control of you, Never-Ever.

You are the one who decides who, where, and when. And no matter how you may feel about her, or any boy for that matter, they have no right to push their agenda on-’ ‘It’s not like that,’ I tell her, cutting in before she gets any more embarrassing than it already has. ‘Naddalin’s not like that. She is a perfect girl, an ideal girlfriend. Seriously, Jaylynn, you are way off course. Just trust me on the one, okay?’

She looks at me for a moment, brittle orange aura wavering, wanting to believe, unsure if she should.

Then she picks up her bag and heads for the door, stopping just shy of it when she says, ‘I was thinking-’

I look at her, tempted to peek at her thoughts, despite my vow to never intentionally breach her privacy like that unless it has an emergency of course, which she is not.

‘Since school is letting out soon even if we are back on Earth as normal-looking girls we still must go to school as if were normal girls of our age, and

since I have not heard you mention any summer plans, I thought it might be good for you to find a job, spend a few hours each day working at something.'

'What do you think?'

'What do you think of as normal?'

What do I think…?

I gape, with bugging eyes, mouth dry, at a complete loss for words... I was, well, I think I should have peered into your head think over your thoughts more than my own, because she does succeed as a major agony call!

‘Nothing full time or anything like that. There will be plenty of time for the beach and your friends. I just thought it would be good for you too-’

‘Is the about money?’

My mind reeling, frantic to find a way out…

If it is a simple matter of pitching in for the mortgage and groceries, then I will gladly produce whatever she needs.

Not even a day. Un-huh. No way, hell, she can even take whatever is left of my parent’s life insurance policy for all I care it did set me for life,

after the fact… but what she cannot have been my summer.

‘Ever, of course, it is not about money- is it not yet that’s also life, no?’ She averts her gaze as her cheeks flush soft pink.

Mysteriously averse to discussing all things economic for someone who makes a living as a nurse, on and off with the Earthing she chooses to be in within her life spans or within her old body too.

‘I just thought it might be good for you to, you know, meet some new people, learn something new.

Get out of your usual environment for a few hours each day, and-’ And get away from Naddalin.

Not needing to read her thoughts to know what the is about, now that she knows we are back together she is more strong-minded than ever to break us apart.

Besides, while I get how troubled she was by all the moodiness and despair, I lay open to her when we were apart, the time she had it all wrong.

It is not like she thinks. Though I’ve no idea how to explain that to her

and keep my secrets intact. ‘-and as it so happens, a summer internship just opened for me, working with her as an LPN, and I’m sure, it’s just a matter of speaking with the senior partners, and the job will be mine.’ Then she grins, face radiant, eyes bright, expecting me to join the fête as well- when I do it at last.

‘But aren’t those positions usually reserved for law students?’ I ask, sure I am pathetically underqualified to fill those shoes.

But she just shakes her head. ‘It’s not that type of internship. This is more of a filing and phone answering

assignment. And there is no money in it either, though you will get school credit and a small end of the season bonus. I just thought it might do you some good. Not to mention how it will beef up those college applications of yours.' College- yet another thing I used to obsess about but not anymore.

I mean, what use could I have for all those classes and professors when all I must do is place my hand on a book or peek inside my teacher is hard to know all the answers? Cheating is too easy, yet miss honesty wants me to do it the hard way, I question why?

This is something that I have questioned her with for years if you have the power to take then do so-o, you are not hurting anyone but yourself.

‘I’d hate for anyone else to get in there when I know you’re simply perfect for the job.’

I stare at her, unsure of what to say.

‘It’s a pleasant experience for a person your age,’ she adds, her indignant tone a result of my silence.

‘It’s suggested in all the books. They say it builds charisma, promise,

and the chastisement to show up on time and get the job done.'

Great, So, I have Dr. Phil to thank for ruining my summer- I thought.

It is my fault she changed, I am annoyed with Jaylynn until I remember how she was when I first got her-calm, tranquil, and completely laid back, allowing me all the space and freedom I needed.

My postponement, my rejection to ingest anything other than the pink solution, and all the drama with

Naddalin are what sent her over the edge.

Besides the is where it led to the dreaded summer internship, she is bent on securing for me.

But no way can I spend the summer juggling a mountain of files and incessantly ringing phones when I am going to need all my free time, I can get to find an antidote for Naddalin.

And working in Jaylynn's office-within the nursing department within the Rosman building, with her and her colleagues prying over my shoulder, just will not do, sometimes I was just a

little schoolchild still- I miss that day, and I think about and say within my mind not really- am meant to be genuinely happy?

Though it is not like I can say that outright. It will set off her alarms. I need to play it cool, let her know that while I've nothing against discipline and character building, I prefer to tackle those things on my own.

'I'm cool with working,' I say, trying not to press my lips together, fidget, or break eye contact, three definite giveaways that I am not being entirely honest. 'But since you do so much for me already, I'd feel a lot

better if I could find my job. I mean, I am just not sure I am cut out for office work, so maybe I could look around a little. See what my options are. I will even pitch in on the mortgage and food. It's the least I can do.'

'What food?' She laughs, shaking her head at me.

'You barely eat! Besides, I do not want your money, ever… though, I will help you establish a line of credit if you'd like.'

'Sure,' I shrug, forcing an enthusiasm I do not feel since I do not need such conventional things. 'That

would be great!' I add, knowing that the longer I can keep her mind off the internship, the better for me.

'Okay then,' she drums her fingers against the doorjamb as she completes her plan. 'You've got one week to find something on your own.'

I gulp, trying to keep the eye-bugging to a minimum. One week? What kind of a head start is that when I do not even know where to begin? I have never had a job before. Is it possible to just manifest one?

'I know it's not much time,' she says, reading my face. 'But I'd hate for

them to fill the position when I know you'd be perfect.'

She heads into the hall and closes the door between us, leaving me sideswiped, dumbstruck, staring at the flickering remnants of her orangey aura, her magnetic energy field, hovering insistently in the space where she stood. Thinking how ironic it is that I was just making fun of Naddalin for assuming she could land a job without any experience only to find myself facing the same fate.

I toss and turn all night. Bed a tangled mess of sweat-dampened pillows and blankets, body, and mind

exhausted by dreams. Waking briefly, gasping for air, only to be pulled under again, returning to the very same place I fought to escape.

And the only reason- I want it to stop is that Riley is there. Laughing happily as she grabs hold of my hand, taking me on a tour of a very strange land. But even though I skip right alongside her, pretending to enjoy the trip too, the moment she turns her back, I scramble for the surface, eager to remove myself from the scene.

Because, the truth is, it is not Riley. Riley is gone. Having crossed the bridge at my urging, moving on to some

unknown place. And even though she keeps yanking me back, yelling at me to pay attention, to just trust her and stop running- I refuse to obey. Sure, that it is punishment for harming Naddalin, sending Haven to Shadowland, and putting everything I care about at risk- allowing my subconscious to produce these guilt-induced images, so sugar-coated with happiness, there is no way they are real.

But the last time, just as I am about to run, Riley appears right before me, blocking my exit, and yelling at me to stay put. Standing before a large stage and slowly drawing the drapes,

revealing a tall, narrow, rectangular cube-like a prison of glass-containing a desperate and struggling Naddalin inside.

I rush to her aid as Riley looks on, pleading with her to hang in there while I help her break free. But she cannot even hear me. I cannot even see me. Just continues to fight until so overcome with exhaustion, with absolute futility, she closes her eyes and fades straight into the abyss.

The home for lost souls.

I bolt from my bed, body shaking, chilled, drenched with sweat,

standing in the center of my room with a pillow clutched to my chest. Overcome not only by the feeling of utter defeat but by the horrible message my imagined sister has sent- telling me that no matter how hard I try, I cannot save my soul mate from me.

I run for my closet, changing into some clothes before grabbing some sneakers and heading for the garage. Knowing it is too early to go to school, too early to go anywhere. But I refuse to give up. Refuse to believe in nightmares. I must start somewhere. I must use what I got.

But just as I am about to climb into my car, I think better. Realizing the entire process of opening the garage door and starting the engine will risk waking Jaylynn. And even though I can easily step outside and manifest another car, bike, Vespa, or whatever else I might want, I decided to try running instead.

I have never been much of a runner. Far more used to dragging my feet through every forced lap in P.E. than striving for any personal best. But that was before I became immortal. Before I was bestowed with incredible speed. A speed I have not even begun

to test the limits of since the last time I ran was the first time I realized I even had the potential. But now that I am faced with the perfect opportunity to see just how far and fast, I can go before stopping, dropping, or crumbling to the ground with a debilitating case of side cramps, I cannot wait to try it out.

I slip out the side door and head for the street. At first thinking, I should warm-up, start in a nice slow jog before hitting the asphalt at full throttle. But no sooner have I started than a major surge of adrenaline kicks in, coursing through my body like the

highest-grade rocket fuel. And the next thing I know, it is full speed ahead. Running so fast my neighbor's houses are reduced to a visual blur of stucco and stone. Jumping fallen trash cans and dodging poorly parked cars, as I race from street to street with the grace and agility of a jungle cat. Having no awareness of my legs or my feet, just trusting they will not fail me. That they will get me to my destination in a miraculous time.

And no more than a few seconds have passed when I am standing before it, the one place I swore I would never return to,

prepared to do the one thing I promised Naddalin I am would not- approaching Naddalin's door, hoping to broker a deal.

But before I can even raise my hand to knock, Naddalin is there. Clad in a deep purple robe over blue silk pajamas, her matching velvet slippers with embroidered golden foxes peeking out from the herm. Her gaze sleek, narrowed, looking me over without a trace of surprise.

'Ever.' She cocks her head to the side, allowing for an unobstructed view of her flashing Ouroboros tattoo. 'What brings you to the neighborhood?'

My fingers play with the amulet just under my shirt, heart racing beneath it, hoping Naddalin's right, that it will give the necessary protection-should it come to that.

'We need to talk,' I say, trying not to cringe as her eyes sail over me, enjoying a nice, long, leisurely cruise.

She squints into the night, then goes back at me. 'Do we?' She lifts her brow. 'And here I had no idea.'

I start to roll my eyes, but remembering my purpose for coming here, I settle for pressing my lips together instead.

‘Recognize the door?’ She raps her knuckles hard against the wood, eliciting a nice solid thump, as I wonder what she could be up to. ‘Of course, you do not,’ she says, lips quirking at the sides. ‘That’s because it’s new. I was forced to replace the old one after your last visit. Do you remember? When you busted your way in so you could toss my supply of elixir down the drain?’ She laughs and shakes her head. ‘Very naughty of you, ever. And quite a mess I must say. I hope you’ll manage to behave better today.’ She leans against the door frame and waves me in, gazing at me in a way so deep,

so intimate, it is all I can do not to squirm.

I heard down the hall and into the den, noticing how the door is not the only thing that has changed since I was last here. Gone are the framed Botticelli prints and abundance of chintz, all of it replaced by marble and stone, dark heavy fabrics, rough plastered walls, and black iron things shaped into scrolls.

'Tuscan?' I turn, startled to find her standing so near I can see the individual dark purple flecks in her eyes.

She shrugs, refusing to back up and give me some space. ‘Sometimes I get a little hankering for the old country.’ Her smiles, a slow widening of her cheeks, displaying shiny white teeth. ‘As you well know, Ever, there’s no place like home.’

I swallow hard and turn away, trying to decide my quickest escape since I cannot afford to make even the slightest mistake.

‘So, tell me, so what do I owe the magnificent Jewell?’ She glances over her shoulder as she heads for the bar. Removing a bottle of elixir from the wine refrigerator and pouring it

into a cut crystal glass, before offering it to me. But I just shake my head and wave it away, watching as she carries it over to the couch where she plops herself down, spreads her legs wide, and rests the glass on her knee. ‘I’m assuming you didn’t quickly visit in the dead of night to admire my latest decorating scheme. So, tell me, what’s the purpose of them?’

I clear my throat, forcing myself to look her square in the eye without flinching, wavering, fidgeting, or showing any other sign of weakness. Aware of how the whole situation can change in an instant- how easily I can

turn from mild curiosity to irresistible prey.

‘I’m here to call a truce,’ I say, alert for a reaction but getting only her penetrating gaze. ‘You know, a cease-fire, a proclamation of peace, a-’

‘Please.’ She waves her hand. ‘Spare me the definition, Liv- I can say it in twenty languages and forty dialects, you?’

I shrug, knowing I am lucky to have said it is the one. Watching as she swirls her drink, the iridescent red liquid flashing and sparking as it runs up the sides and splashes back down.

‘And just what sort of truce are you after? You of all people should know how it works. I’ve no intention of giving you anything unless you’re willing to give up something of your own.’ She passes the narrow space just beside her, smiling as though I would consider joining her there.

‘Why do you do them?’ I ask, unable to hold my frustration. ‘I mean, you’re decent looking, you’re immortal, you’ve got all the gifts that go with it you can have anyone you want, so why do you insist on bothering me?’

She throws her head back and laughs, a giant roar that fills up the

room. Finally calming down enough to level her gaze, looking at me as she says, ‘Decent looking?’ She shakes her head and laughs again, placing her glass on the table and retrieving a pair of golden nail clippers from a jewel-encrusted case.

‘Decent looking,’ she mutters, shaking her head, taking a moment to check out her nails, before returning her focus to me. ‘But you see, liv, that’s just it. I can have anything I want. Anything or anyone.

It all comes so easily. Too easy.’ Her sighs, getting to work on her nails, so absorbed by the task, I’m

wondering if she'll continue when she says, 'It all gets a little tedious after the first-oh-hundred or so years. And while you are far too new to understand any of them, someday you'll realize just how big of a favor I've done you.'

I squinted, having no idea what she could mean. A favor? Is she serious?

'You sure you won't have a seat?' She wags her nail clipper toward the overstuffed chair just to my right, urging me to take it. 'You're making me out to be an awfully bad host, insisting on standing there like that. Besides, do you have any idea how fetching you

look? A little-bedridden-sure, but in the sexiest way.’

She narrows her eyes until they are sleek as a cat’s, lips parting just enough for her tongue to escape. But I just stay put and pretend not to notice. Everything with Naddalin is a game and taking a seat would be a conceded defeat. Though staying like the, being careful wet her lips as her gaze lingers in all the wrong places, does not feel like much of a win.

‘You’re even more delusional than I thought if you think you’ve done me a favor,’ I say, voice hoarse, scratchy, a long way from strong.

‘You’re crazy!’ I add, regretting it the instant it is out.

But Naddalin just shrugs, unfazed by my outburst as she returns to her nails. ‘Trust me, it’s more than just a favor, liv. I have given you a purpose. A- reason d’être as they say.’ She glances at me, brow raised. ‘Tell me, Ever, are you not completely fixated on finding a way to-consummate-with Naddalin? Are you not so desperate for a solution as you convinced yourself it was a clever idea to come here?’

I swallow hard and stare at her. I should have known better, should have heeded Naddalin's advice.

'You're too impatient.' She nods, smoothing the edges of her freshly clipped nails. 'What's the rush when you have all of the infinity laid out before you? Think about it, Ever, how exactly would you spend your eternity if it were not for me? Showering each other with huge bouquets of bloody red tulips? Having looked at each other so often it couldn't help but grow boring?'

'The is ridiculous.' I glare. 'And the fact that you see it like the-like it is

some chivalrous deed that you've done-' I shake my head, knowing there is no need to continue. She is delusional, insane, figured out to see things in her selfish way.

'Hundred years within my body and others- it all the same, I yearned for her,' she says, tossing her nail clippers aside, gaze never once leaving mine.

'And why, you ask? Why would I bother with the same woman for so long when I can have anyone?' She looks at me as though waiting for the answer, but we both know I've no intention of going there.

‘It wasn’t just her beauty like you think-though I will admit, it did spur things at the start.’ Her smiles, eyes reminiscent. ‘No, it was a simple fact that I couldn’t have her. No matter how hard I tried, no matter how long I pined, I was never allowed’-she looks at me, gazes heavy, intense-admittance-if you will.’

I roll my eyes. I cannot help it. The fact that she wasted centuries pining for that monster is of no interest to me.

But she just continues, ignoring my pained expression when she says, ‘Make no mistake, Ever, I am about to

share something especially important, something you really should keep in mind.' She leans forward, arms on knees, voice steady and low, filled with new urgency. 'We always want what we can't have.' She leans back, nodding as though she just shared the key to enlightenment. 'It's human nature. We are hardwired that way. And as much as you would prefer not to believe it, it's the only reason Naddalin's spent the last four hundred years longing for you.'

I look at her, face placid, body still, aware that she is trying to hurt me, prodding the usual spots, knowing

she has been one of my fears from the moment I first learned of our history.

'Face, it, Ever, even Haven's incredible beauty wasn't enough to keep her interest. I'm sure you're aware of just how quickly she got tired of her?'

I swallow hard, stomach like a hard-bitten marble. Since when are two hundred years considered quickly? But I guess when you are dealing with eternity everything is relative.

'It's not a beauty contest,' I say, cringing when I hear the words

spoken aloud. I mean, seriously, is that the best I could do?

‘Of course, it is not, Luv.’ Naddalin shakes her head, pity in her gaze. ‘If it were, Haven would win.’ She settles back, arms spread across the cushions, glass resting on top, daring me to respond. ‘Let me guess, you’ve convinced yourself it’s about two souls meeting as one, destined for each other, and all of the that-puppy love?’ She laughs, nodding when she adds, ‘That is what you’re thinking, right?’

‘You don’t want to know what I’m thinking.’ I narrowed my gaze, decided to get to the point now that my

patience’s dissolved. ‘I didn’t come here to be bored by your philosophical litanies; I came here because-’

‘Because you want something from me.’ She nods, setting down her drink, glass meeting wood with a solid, wet thwomp. ‘In which case, I am in the driver’s seat, which means you’re in no position to set the pace.’

‘Why do you do them?’ I shake my head, having grown bored with the game. ‘Why do you bother where you know I’m not interested? Surely you realize that no matter what you do to Naddalin and me, it will never bring Haven back. What is done is done. It

can never be changed. And, in the end, all the game playing, all of the nonsense you engage in all it does is prevent you from living your life-from moving on.' I continue to stare, gaze unwavering, convincing. Projecting an image of her handing over the antidote and cooperating with me. 'So, I am asking you, in as reasonable a way as I can please help me undo what you have done to Naddalin, so we can all coexist.'

She shakes her head; lids squinted tight. 'Sorry, darlin,' the price is set. Now it's just a matter of whether you're willing to pay.'

I lean against the wall, tired, defeated, but not letting on. Knowing the one thing she wants is the one thing I will never give. The same old game Naddalin warned me about. ‘You’ll never have me, Naddalin. Never, ever, for as long as I-’

Not even getting to the more degrading, insulting part that comes next when she rises from the couch, moving so quickly her breath hits my cheek long before I can blink.

‘Relax,’ she whispers, face looming so close I can make out each flawless pore on her skin. ‘As much fun as that might be, giving an amusing

diversion at least, I'm afraid that's not it. I am after something far more esoteric than a virginal shag. Though, if you would like to make a go of it, no strings attached, then I assure you, darlin,' I'm certainly up for the task.' Her smiles, deep blue eyes boring into mine, projecting the movie she plays in her head, the one starring her, and me, and a king-sized bed.

I look away, breath coming ragged, too fast, summoning every ounce of my will not to slam my knee in her groin when her nose glances at my ear, my cheek, my neck, inhaling my scent.

‘I know what you’re going through, Ever,’ she murmurs, lips brushing the tip of my ear. ‘Longing for something so close and yet you can never quite taste it. It is the kind of pain most people will never experience. But we know, don’t we? You and I are joined in that way.’

I relax my fists and fight to steady myself. Knowing I cannot risk doing anything rash, I cannot afford to overreact.

‘Not to worry she said.’

She smiles at me, slipping just out of my reach.

‘You’re a nifty girl.

I am sure you will figure it out.

And if not-’ Her shrugs. ‘Well, nothing changes, right? Everything stays the same. You and I with our fates intertwined-for all of infinity.’

She slips down the hall, moving so fast it is a moment before I can make out her form. Tilting her head and urging me toward the door, practically pushing me onto her stoop when she says, ‘Sorry to cut them so short. Though I do so with your reputation in mind. If Naddalin ever found out you

were here-well, that could be tragic for you, couldn't it?'

Her smiles, all shiny white teeth, golden hair, tanned skin, and blue eyes-the ultimate California poster boy beckoning-Come live the good life in Laguna Beach! And I am furious with myself-furious for being so stupid for not listening to Naddalin-for putting us further at risk. Handing Naddalin yet one more thing to lord over my head.

'Sorry you didn't get what you came for, Liv,' she purrs, her attention pulled by a vintage black Jaguar that pulls into the drive, having a gorgeous dark-haired couple who head right

inside. Closing the door behind them as she adds, ‘Whatever you do, avoid Marco’s car on your way out, she’ll flip if you so much as smudge it.’

I walk home… Or at least, that is the direction I originally heard it. But somewhere along the way, I take a turn. And then another. And another. My feet moving so slowly they practically drag, knowing there is no need to run, nothing to prove. Despite my strength and speed, I am no match for Naddalin. here is the expert of the game and I am merely her pawn.

I continue, deep into the heart of Laguna, or the Village, as it is called.

Too awake to go home, too ashamed to see Naddalin, making my way through the dark, empty streets until stopping before a small, well-tended cottage, with flowering plants flanking either side of the door and a woven welcome mat placed just so, making it appear warm, friendly, completely benign.

Only it is not… Not even close. Now it is more like a crime scene. And unlike the last time I was here, the time I do not bother knocking. There is no point. Ava’s long gone. After stealing the elixir and leaving Naddalin to fend for herself, she has no intention of returning.

I unlock the door with my mind and step in, taking a quick look around before I move past the den and into the kitchen. Surprised to find the usually well-ordered room reduced to an absolute mess-the sink piled high with dirty glasses and dishes as the trash overflows to the floor. And even though I am sure it is not Ava who has done the, clearly someone is here.

I creep down the hall, peering into a series of empty rooms until I get to the indigo door at the end, the one that leads to Ava’s so-called sacred space where she used to meditate and try to reach dimensions beyond.

Opening the door just a crack and squinting into the dark, making out two sleeping figures sprawled on the floor. Skimming my hand along the wall and fruitlessly searching for a light, before remembering my ability to illuminate the room on my own only to find the last two people I ever expected to see.

'Rayne?' I kneel beside her, holding my breath as she rolls over and opens one eye.

'Oh Henry, ever.' She rubs her eyes and struggles to sit. 'Only I am not Rayne, I'm Neville. Rayne's over there.'

I glance at her twin on the far side of the room, noting the scowl that crosses her face the second she realizes it is me.

‘What’re you doing here?’ I ask, focusing on Neville again since she has always been the nicer of the two.

‘We live here.’ She shrugs, tucking her wrinkled white shirt into her blue plaid skirt as she gets off the floor.

I glance between them, taking in their pale skin, large dark eyes, and straight, black, shoulder-length hair with the razor-slashed bangs, noticing

how they are both still dressed in the same private school uniforms as the first day we met. But unlike in School where they always appear so clean and pristine, now they are the opposite- sadly disheveled and completely uncared for.

‘But you can’t live here. The is Ava’s house.’ I shake my head. The idea of them squatting here leaves me extremely unnerved. ‘Maybe you should think about going home. You know, back to school with the other girls?’